

This story is set after Chamber of Secrets.

In a grimy and dank cell in the lowest level of the most feared prison of the Wizarding world, thirteen year old Harry Potter shuddered as the Dementors moved silently towards his cell and the unwanted memories rose in his mind.

" Phoenix tears. - ." said Riddle quietly, staring at Harry's arm. "Of course ... healing powers ... I forgot. . ."

He looked into Harry's face. "But it makes no difference. In fact, I prefer it this way. Just you and me, Harry Potter ... you and me..."

He raised the wand

Then, in a rush of wings, Fawkes had soared back overhead and something fell into Harry's lap -- the diary.

For a split second, both Harry and Riddle, wand still raised, stared at it.

*Then, without thinking, without considering, as though he had meant to do it all along, Harry seized the Basilisk fang on the floor next to him and plunged it straight into the **heart of the distracted former student.***

There was a long, dreadful, piercing scream. Riddle was writhing and twisting, screaming and flailing and then he had gone.

Harry's wand fell to the floor with a clatter and there was silence.

Shaking all over, Harry pulled himself up. His head was spinning as though he'd just travelled miles by Floo powder

Slowly, he gathered together his wand and the Sorting Hat.

A faint moan came from the end of the Chamber; Ginny was stirring.

As Harry hurried toward her, she sat up. Her bemused eyes travelled from the huge form of the dead Basilisk, over Harry, in his blood-soaked robes, then to the diary in his hand.

A smirk curled the corners of her mouth.

"Harry -- oh, Harry -- I tried to tell you, but you just don't listen very well do you?" she said. "Although I must confess that I am surprised you had enough presence of mind to destroy my conjured body."

The magically summoned memories began to fade as the mind of the teenage boy slowly returned to the present. The cries of his murdered parents were no longer the worst memory of his short life. Indeed, those very same memories would have almost been a welcomed relief now. Other images haunted him these days, memories far worse than the death of people he didn't really know.

As the last effects of the monstrous guards left him, he heard a soft pop echo from the equally dank cell next door, and the worried sound of his godfather's voice echoed through the practically empty cell.

"Prongs, are you there?" came the hushed whisper from the corner near the head of the bare cot.

They had scratched away the mortar between some of the badly fitted stone blocks to make a small gap joining their respective cells. It wasn't much, but it meant they could talk to each other easier than through the grill in the metal door.

"Prongs!" came the shaky voice, slightly louder this time. "Come on, snap out of it."

Harry knew Sirius sometimes seemed confused about who Harry was, often mistaking him for his father, but the man was not nearly as far gone as most of the other inhabitants of this level.

"Come on, Prongs," insisted the voice. "Change back. Come on, kiddo. Don't give in on me now. Change back. You know you can't stay that way forever."

Why not? thought Harry.

What was so wrong with spending the rest of his certain-to-be-short life as an animal? His mind was more at peace this way. Maybe, if he stayed like this long enough, he would forget everything and never have to relive a nightmare memory again.

“Please?” pleaded Sirius quietly. “I don’t think I could go on if you give up now.”

Harry sighed inwardly.

The only thing, that could even remotely be considered good to come from his imprisonment, was the affect it had on his Godfather.

Sirius responded to Harry’s presence, dragging his failing mind from the depths where it hid, out into the open. Sometimes, especially when he was recounting happier times to his godson, he almost seemed normal.

To give up now and leave him would no doubt destroy the man, especially after the effort the long-time prisoner made to introduce himself and win Harry’s confidence.

“If you don’t change back right this instant, I am going to come in there and give you a spanking like you’ve never had before, young man!” mocked Sirius, in what was supposed to be an extremely poor imitation of Harry’s mother.

Incredibly, it made Harry laugh.

With a soft pop he was once again a malnourished, pale young boy lying under a threadbare blanket on a rickety cot in possibly the worst prison in the world, but he was smiling - A weak, crooked smile, but a smile nevertheless.

“Now that is something I would like to see,” said Harry, his voice harsh and scratchy.

“Don’t tempt me,” answered Sirius, relief obvious in voice. “I have no doubt you are in reality sitting on that soft double bed of yours

drinking pumpkin juice through a four-foot long straw while I rot in this toilet of a cell.”

“I’ve told you a millions times before,” Harry answered. “It’s a five-foot long straw.”

Sirius laughed briefly before asking the question Harry knew was coming.

“So what are we going to do today, pup? We have a couple of hours before the Dementors come back with our dinner. Got any plans?”

Harry sighed again. It was a game they started playing not long after Harry first entered his cell, once Sirius got over the sight of a thirteen year old James Potter clone getting carried into the prison.

A number of prisoners had responded to Harry’s imprisonment. Surprisingly, a few that still held onto some shred of sanity, were outraged and disgusted that such a young boy could be locked up in the same section as them. Others were less courteous.

Many of the former followers of Voldemort laughed and jeered, risking a sharp shock from the wands of the human guards, to laugh in the face of the person once celebrated as the saviour of the wizarding world.

It was still a mystery to Harry how he was convicted of letting loose the creature from the Chamber to wreak havoc on the school, or how he was considered responsible for Ginny’s catatonia. Then again, Sirius was never even given a trial.

“Not sure today, Padfoot,” he answered. “Think I might just have a bit of a lie-in. You know, have a day off-”

An inhuman scream of terror and despair from a cell further down the corridor interrupted him.

Despite surviving the prison for months, he was still shaken by the occasional bout of madness that some of the other inmates suffered. Merlin knew how close he came to screaming out in madness himself.

Many of their talks were interrupted by other inmates in their more lucid moments, although few were sane enough to try and talk with them.

“SHUT IT, YOU HAG!” screamed Sirius almost hysterically, in response. “SOME OF US ARE TRYING TO HAVE A CIVIL CONVERSATION HERE.”

Half a dozen other voices joined in, yelling until the screaming stopped.

Harry was in no doubt that he would have long ago become one of the ‘screaming ones’ as Sirius called them, if not, in a twist of irony too unbelievable to contemplate, he had been put into the cell next to his mostly sane Godfather.

Sometimes he wondered if Dumbledore arranged that, as a mercy, or if Malfoy set it up, as an additional punishment.

Harry may not have understood how he could have been put into this jail, let alone how he was transferred into the maximum security level, but he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, who was responsible.

Lucius Malfoy.

Between Malfoy, that bungling idiot Fudge, the semi-recovered fraudster Lockhart, and Harry’s own loving family – the Dursleys, Harry was convincingly presented as well on his way to becoming the next Dark Lord.

How anybody could believe the fantastic story Lockhart spun about battling the Basilisk, especially in light of Harry and Ron’s testimony, was beyond Harry. Not only did the wizarding public believe it, they were totally convinced he was Voldemort reborn.

On the strength of the case made by Malfoy, and no doubt in part due to much gold changing hands, Ron was sent to St. Mungos, and Harry was condemned to hell, while Lockhart and Malfoy soared to new heights of popularity.

“Come on, Kiddo,” urged Sirius, once all the yelling stopped and the noise level died back down to its normal dull murmur of misery and suffering. “You’re far too young to waste away your life in bed daydreaming about girls and Quidditch. It’s time to get up and get about. Come on, lazy-bones.”

Sirius kept Harry sane, and alive. He talked him through the first few weeks almost non-stop. Even when the Dementors were standing in the same cell, Sirius kept talking to Harry, calling out to him through the bars, urging him to ignore the horrific memories and focus on a single fact; that he was innocent.

When the presence of the Dementors threatened to destroy Harry, Sirius told him tales of his parent’s youth.

When even that started to be less effective, Sirius helped him become an Animagus.

That Harry was able to perform the complex transformation in such a short period of time astounded the both of them. Sirius was sure it had something to do with Harry’s youth, since the Marauders found it easier to learn as teenagers than witches and wizards twice their age.

He speculated Harry’s lack of familiarity with magic may also have contributed – something about his magic not being nailed down to his body yet – but Harry suspected it was because of the pressure of trying to survive the seemingly everlasting damnation that life in prison was for him.

It could even have been something like accidental magic that many teenagers still occasionally experienced well into their fourth year at school, pushing the transformation.

Not that it mattered how. All that mattered was that, over a month ago, he first successfully transformed, and it was saving his sanity and his life.

The problem now was that it was getting increasingly harder for him to change back, especially since the Dementors’ affect seemed to be growing stronger.

"It's getting worse, Sirius," he said, all traces of humour leaving him abruptly. "I nearly saw the whole Chamber this time; right from just after I killed the Basilisk."

He heard Sirius slump down on to the floor of his cell next to the hole.

"We have to escape then," Sirius said. "It's the only way."

It was a mad plan, almost certain to fail, but if he didn't get out of the prison soon, he knew he was doomed anyway.

Any hope of Dumbledore or one of his professors rescuing him was long gone.

The Headmaster's failure to stop him from being convicted in the first place left Harry feeling betrayed, and the elder Weasleys' fierce attack on him, despite Ron's staunch defence, made him feel guilty beyond anything he had ever known before.

At one point, he felt like he deserved to be here, for not saving Ginny.

Sirius talked him out of that self-condemning spiral of thought. Through the hours of conversations, the older man argued and laughed and taught Harry about life, from his admittedly skewed point of view.

When Harry looked back at it now, he could clearly see how much Sirius improved since becoming his cell-neighbour, and in return, Harry found a true friend in a place that never before knew anything except fear and hatred.

"When?" he asked, knowing he was committing them to a probably fatal course of action.

"Tonight," answered Sirius, after a short pause. "No point in putting it off, especially if you are getting worse. This isn't going to be easy, you know?"

"I know," Harry said.

"Get some sleep then."

Harry nodded, knowing Sirius couldn't see him, and closed his eyes.

He ran his mind through the meditation-like exercises Sirius taught him, and was soon deep in sleep that would again be interrupted by nightmares.

Ronald Weasley trudged down the long hospital corridor away from what he knew was going to be one of his last therapy sessions.

His soft slippers were incapable of making anything more substantial than slight shuffling noises, no matter how hard he tried, but at this point he was far too distracted to even think of trying.

After months of intensive therapy, Ron was actually beyond any childish need to flaunt his rebellion, but he usually did it anyway, just to be consistent.

In fact, mentally, Ron was almost a new man.

Subtle probing by skilled Legilimens, examining particularly significant memories in a Pensieve, and long hours of being forced to openly discuss and confront his emotions and feelings, gave Ron a calmness and stability he never before dreamt was possible.

All of the healers agreed, when they thought he wasn't around to listen to their frank discussions, that he was nothing more than a normal, angst-ridden teen with a slight inferiority complex and some jealousy issues, which they helped sort out fairly easily.

Now, after having many of the most accomplished mind specialist in Brittain spend weeks working with him, he was a very level headed and sensible adolescent, years more mature than the vast majority of his peers.

Even his mortal fear of spiders was conquered.

Almost.

Yet the one thing that they were not able to do, the one central issue that not even the vaunted skills of the highest paid wizarding healers

could begin to change, was to make him blame Harry Potter for the state of his sister.

All of their hard work just made him even more confident in his belief, and instilled in him an unshakable faith in his best friend.

Even his parents, at first convinced that Harry somehow befuddled Ron, when faced with their youngest son's utter conviction in the boy-who-lived's innocent, started doubting their own beliefs and began questioning the various stories they had been told surrounding the abduction of their only daughter.

Ron's older brothers were divided in their opinions, and were banned from discussing the issue, at home as well as when visiting Ron, after it once again degenerated into a fistfight during a 'supervised' meeting with the healers as part of the youngest boy's therapy.

One of the healers summed it up perfectly in yet another of their supposedly secret meetings.

"We might as well lie to Fudge about young Mr. Weasley's progress because the only way that boy is ever going to change his mind is if we physically pull it out of his skull and swap it for one from the Department of Mysteries. He pretty well has *me* convinced!"

That's how Ron knew his time in the immaculate white walled prison was coming to an end.

He knew he had beaten them all.

It was not childish pride, or unwarranted arrogance. It was the calm confidence of somebody who had searched deep into the pit of their soul to find, fight, and banish the demons that lurked there.

Once he was out, he was going to rescue Harry – no matter what the cost.

That was the plan, until an 'interview' with the three healers who oversaw his case was rudely interrupted by an aggressive pair of Aurors demanding to interrogate Ron.

Through the barrage of meaningless questions thrown at him, with brutal disregard for his supposed 'delicate' state and over the objections of his healers, Ron discovered one solid fact:

Harry Potter, the-boy-who-live, his best friend, had once again done the impossible.

He not only escaped Azkaban prison – supposedly the most secure facility that had ever existed – he also rescued his godfather while he was at it.

A smile bent Ron's mouth as he returned to his sterile room and the pile of schoolwork patiently waiting for him.

It seems he wasn't the only one with an indomitable will.

"Harry -- oh, Harry -- I tried to tell you, but you just don't listen very well do you?" Ginny said calmly. "Although I must confess that I am surprised you had enough presence of mind to destroy my conjured body."

Fear gripped Harry's heart as her voice echoed through the chamber. It had a hard, cold quality to it, just like Riddle's.

"That's right," agreed the younger girl, seeing his expression. "My soul is now in this body, just like I told you, and nothing you can do will change that."

And then Ginny laughed a terrifying laugh that chilled Harry even further as his panic grew.

"She can't be dead," he said. "I destroyed you!"

The laughter stopped and cold eyes regarded him as if they were looking at a bug.

"No, Harry, you only destroyed the simulacrum of my memory – the conjured body I would have inhabited once the life had been drained from this one."

Ginny/Riddle stood, a wand suddenly appeared in her hand.

"Of course, I cannot allow you to leave here alive, Harry. So goodbye."

As she raised the wand, he threw the hat at her and launched himself forward.

Ginny batted the hat aside but couldn't avoid Harry as he grabbed her robed wrists and knocked them both to the floor.

Despite his battered condition, the strength of his fear was driving him, but the fight with the Basilisk had taken its toll, and Ginny's superior condition started to show as they wrestled. Slowly she started to twist the wand towards him, despite his best efforts to hold it away.

Grunting with effort, Harry knew he was going to loose, and the second that wand was aimed at him it would be all over.

"Give in, Potter," she snarled. "You are going to die."

In desperation, Harry suddenly changed the direction he was pushing her arms and swept the wand past his face. The dangerous gambit worked and Ginny's hastily released spell shot over his shoulder so close that he felt the hair above his ears burn with its passing.

"What do you think you are going to do, Harry?" Ginny asked, obviously trying to distract him while struggling to bring the wand back. "Kill me with your bare hands?"

Suddenly Harry knew what he had to do.

Thrusting her arms away with one hand, Harry reached out clamped his other one on the side of Ginny's face, just as he had done with Quirell years earlier.

"AAAARGH!"

Ginny screamed an inhuman cry of pain and let go of the wand, trying to twist out from under Harry. The side of her face blistering, just as Quirell's had; her fingers smoked where they touched Harry's skin.

Harry grabbed the other side of Ginny's head with his now free hand and held on for dear life.

Her screaming reached new heights as she flailed her arms wildly and jerked her body violently trying to escape the torment, but he pinned her with his legs and held on.

The flesh was almost boiling off of her face, and Harry inwardly recoiled at the horror of what he was doing, but still he held as her struggles began to lessen and her cries faded.

When she stopped moving he collapsed on top of her, crying. He felt the warmth of his blood mixing with his hot tears as they ran down his face.

The drops of water on his face woke Harry.

Gradually he became aware that, while he was apparently snuggled up under a warm furry blanket, and was warmer than he had been since entering prison, he was very uncomfortable.

Part of it was because he was lying down on his side while still in bird form, a somewhat unnatural position his Animagus body was not designed to cope with.

Another reason for his current level of discomfort was the weight of the 'furry blanket'. Sirius's dog form was quite large, despite his near emancipated condition, and the weight was because Harry was currently resting on the Grim's paws, tucked under the chin of the sleeping dog.

Finally, Harry realised that the major cause of his discomfort, was the smell.

Wet dogs stink.

And Sirius was very wet.

They managed to escape the black walled fortress a few days ago; Sirius's insane plan working almost exactly as he predicted. The Dementors didn't noticed the dog slip out the door when they were

collecting the empty meal tins, and had barely any time to react when the same dog snuck into the next cell they opened and then darted out carrying a large bird in it's mouth.

The emptiness of the two cells became apparent at the next meal rounds, but Sirius gained enough time to carry the unconscious Harry through the maze-like prison and out into the night before any sort of search for them began.

How he managed to scale the parapets and then swim the vast rolling sea, was a mystery to Harry, who had a few brief flashes of consciousness during that nightmare journey.

Blurred memories of tumbling waves threatening to sweep them off of the log they were using as a raft intermingled with flashes of the Grim's massive jaws gently closing around his fragile body.

Sirius swore that he kept getting a surge of energy from Harry every so often, but admitted he wasn't particularly lucid at that time either.

Since then they were barely ever in human form, changing every few hours for short breaks to try and keep them from the madness that comes with staying an animal for too long. As it was, they knew they were pushing it close, but it was not as if there was much choice at the time.

Harry was having a difficult time learning how to fly. It would have been quite amusing, had they not been so desperate.

Sirius reasoned that they he had not actually had a chance to be dry since their 'swim' to safety, which had led to Harry's current predicament of Sirius's Grim trying to keep Harry dry and warm through the rainy night by sheltering him under his shaggy coat inside of the rough hovel made out of tree branches.

Harry's indignant squawk disturbed the slumbering dog, who took a few moments to wake up before suddenly standing up and inadvertently tumbling Harry to the ground.

Harry hopped to his feet and gave another squawk, hoping to convey the depth of his disgust. He was rewarded by a goofy looking grin

from the massive black dog before it took a step backwards and shook itself in the much vaulted tradition of wet dogs everywhere, but with entirely too much satisfaction for a normal animal.

Harry spread his wings and gave them an experimental flap, unexpectedly lifting off the ground a few inches. There was no doubt they felt lighter, and stronger.

This might actually work, he thought, before giving it an earnest try.

To Sirius's barked delight, his first powerful flap thrust him from the ground, and directly into the branch above his head, almost knocking him out and causing him to fall flat onto his back with stars in his vision.

With a soft pop, Sirius returned to human form, howling with laughter.

Harry joined him a few seconds later, rubbing the top of his head where a definite lump was growing.

He knew they were acting a bit hysterical, but they deserved the break. Eating the little game to be found that Sirius could catch, and hiding from various magical search parties, including groups of Dementors, kept their nerves on a knife's edge of fear for two days straight.

Only in the last few hours had things ease off a bit, possibly because they were further from the prison, or possibly because, with no sign of two fleeing humans for the search parties to follow, their pursuers may have decided the pair had died in the raging sea.

Either that, or Harry and Sirius were heading the wrong way and were moving closer to prison, where the search parties had already been, instead of away.

"Oh, Tweety," laughed Sirius. "I swear, you may have learned the Animagus transformation faster than anybody in history, but I bet you equally have the worst record for mastering the actual animal."

“Hey!” protested Harry. “I resent that. It’s not my fault the first few weeks trying to learn how to fly were done in a room barely large enough to spread my wings in!”

“I don’t even know what kind of a bird I am, aside from your brilliant observation that ‘it’s a kind of *falcony*’ thing!”

They laughed for a few minutes more before the seriousness of their situation caught up with them again.

“So where are we going to go?” asked Harry.

His whole focus had been on surviving, and then escaping the prison. Sirius mentioned a few possibilities, but they had not discussed it much, not daring to tempt fate by planning too far in advance.

“First, we concentrate on getting you fed properly,” answered Sirius, looking at Harry critically. “You are far too skinny and weak for a boy your age.”

Harry didn’t comment. His treatment at the hands of the Dursley’s always left him unhealthily thin, but the months in jail made his former self look positively fat in comparison. Sirius was not particularly well maintained either.

“Eventually we are going to need help,” Sirius continued. “I have a friend or two who might be willing to risk their neck for us, but we are going to have to be very careful. The Aurors and Malfoy are not going to let you go easily.”

“Or you,” said Harry. “Next to me, you are probably on top of their most wanted list.”

Sirius straightened in mock indignation. “What do you mean ‘next to you’?”

It took another hour or two, but finally Harry was airborne and quickly getting the feeling for his Animagus form. He still wasn’t sure what kind of a bird it was, and other than saying he was definitely a falcon, Sirius didn’t really know either.

“Hey the only kind of birds I used to pay attention to wore robes and makeup,” Sirius joked.

Once Harry was in the air, everything started to come naturally. It was like his first time on a broom, but a thousand times better. Before he knew it, he was swooping and diving at incredible speeds, startling other birds out of their wits with dramatic fly-bys.

Suddenly, his stomach grumbled in hunger, and his instincts kicked into overdrive. In blink of an eye he held the broken carcass of a fat pigeon in his claws.

Harry could tell Sirius was very impressed when presented with their dinner, but was trying hard not to show it.

“Not quite as good as that rabbit I got last night,” Sirius said, looking over the pigeon critically. “But acceptable.”

“Can we please cook this one?” pleaded Harry.

“Sure. Just as soon as you learn how to make a fire,” answered Sirius, smirking.

Harry groaned. He previously tried the old ‘rubbing two stick together’ for an hour before giving in and changing to his Animagus form to eat the rabbit. Sirius could eat almost anything in either his dog or human form, whether it was cooked or not, but Harry’s was a much weaker stomach.

Just then, a horribly familiar coldness swept down on them out of the previously clear sky.

“Change!” snapped Sirius, dropping the pigeon and grabbing Harry. “Change NOW!”

Harry fought against the rising tide of memories and panic, and tried to force his body to change.

Hermione Granger was having the worst year of her life.

After being petrified before she could tell anybody except a Ravenclaw prefect about her theory of what Slytherin's monster was, she awoke in the hospital wing to discover her best friend was under arrest for nearly murdering her other best friend's sister.

Not only that, but her well-thought-out, logical arguments for Harry's innocence were brushed away by the authorities as nothing more than the meaningless denials of a love stricken fan-girl.

Even her professors seemingly pushed her aside, ignoring her suggestions in their haste to protect the Headmaster who was being held responsible for Harry's supposed actions.

Having to stand back and watch her two best friends condemned when she knew they were innocent was the last straw. Although she was strong, and was braver than almost anybody, watching helplessly as Ron and Harry were railroaded was more than she could take.

"Mum," she said, after hearing the verdict and watching as a chained Harry Potter was carried away by Dementors. "I don't want to go back to Hogwarts."

"I understand," her mother consoled. "There is only a day or two of school left anyway. I am sure the Headmaster will let you come home early."

Hermione shook her head sadly, tears continuing to stream down her face.

"No, Mum. I don't mean this year, I mean ever. I never want to go to Hogwarts again."

"In fact," she continued, the conviction in her voice strong despite the river of tears flowing from her eyes. "I never want to set foot in the wizarding world again, not while Harry is in jail and Ron is in a mental institution."

In the end, she got most of her wishes. She did not return to Hogwarts, and withdrew almost completely from the wizarding world, but continued her magical education through tutors and self-study.

Discovering under-age witches could use magic for educational purposes was another nail in the coffin of the hypocritical society for the brightest witch of her generation.

For decades witches and wizards, no doubt from rich pureblood families, had the option of using magic under one of the stupidest loopholes imaginable. With only a single tutor assigned for a mere hour a week, Hermione could use magic twenty four hours a day, seven days week, school year or holidays.

The fact there were many more than one tutor, and for significantly more than one hour a week, was irrelevant.

She did not seek to learn how to be a part of the hidden community - she simply sought to learn what they knew. Instead of restricting her studies to the Hogwarts curriculum, she set herself the task of also catching up on her Muggle peers, and was determined to attend a Muggle university and have a Muggle career – and the wizarding world could go hang itself.

Throwing herself into her studies to deaden the pain of her friends' fate, she started to become a shadow of her former self, with only her drive and determination keeping her going.

Her tutors, both magical and Muggle, expressed their concerns to her parents, who in turn became desperate to somehow break their only daughter out of her deepening depression. Not knowing where to turn, they wrote a letter, and posted it with the vaguest of addresses imaginable on the envelope.

Two days later, an unexpected ringing of the doorbell disturbed Hermione's intensive study regime.

Both parents worked most of the day, although they changed their schedules to ensure usually at least one of them was home when there were no tutors, and almost nobody came to visit during the day.

On this particular day, the Muggle maths tutor left some ten minutes earlier, and mother called to say she was going to be a bit late because of a complication with a difficult root canal patient, so Hermione was alone.

Not willing to break her concentration to handle what was probably a doorknocker collecting for some worthy cause, Hermione kept her eyes on her book and opened the door without fear, knowing she had locked the security screen after her tutor left.

When she finally looked up, it was into the amused eyes of somebody she did not really expect to ever see again.

“Hello, Hermione,” said Ron.

Harry knocked and pushed the door open.

For a moment there was silence as Harry, Ron, and Lockhart, still carrying Ginny, stood in the doorway, covered in muck and slime and (in Harry and Ginny's case) blood. Then there was a scream.

"Ginny!"

It was Mrs. Weasley, who had been sitting, crying in front of the fire. She leapt to her feet, closely followed by Mr. Weasley, and both of them flung themselves on the man holding their daughter.

Harry, however, was looking past them. Professor Dumbledore was standing by the mantelpiece, frowning, next to Professor McGonagall, who was taking great, steady gasps, clutching her chest. Fawkes went whooshing past Harry's ear and settled on Dumbledore's shoulder, just as Harry found himself confronted by Mrs. Weasley.

"What have you done to her?" screamed the distraught mother. "What did do to my daughter?"

The days were a continuing struggle for the fugitives. The brief respite from the patrols had come to an abrupt end, forcing them to spend long stretches of time in their animal forms.

Harry couldn't even fly much with so many Dementors scouring the countryside. Should one of them get too close to him while he was in the air, he would likely lose consciousness and plummet to his death.

The hours became a never-ending loop of running, hiding and hunting. If it hadn't been for the desperate and ceaseless nature of their journey, it could well have been fun.

As it was, despite eating better than at any time outside of Hogwarts, Harry knew he was becoming exhausted, and Sirius was likely worse. His godfather did not have the benefit of youth and a full year of sumptuous meals under his belt, and Harry was worried his mental health was deteriorating as their flight and pursuit kept up its harrowing pace.

Harry had stopped paying attention to his surroundings, and was blindly dragging himself along behind Sirius as they searched limestone cliffs near the coast looking for a deep recess to hide in. The wind was too strong and erratic for him to fly while looking, so he trudged along on foot while Padfoot ran on ahead.

The elements had undercut many of the cliffs leaving the limestone depressions carved like some mad artist's sculpture. Stubborn plants clung to the naked face of the rock, defying the elements to sink roots into every loose bit of dirt and to send thin branches into the sky.

"Look for a cave," panted Sirius after changing back to human form. "Usually there are plenty of deep holes in places like this. The further in we can get the more protected and harder to find we'll be."

Harry nodded and dragged himself along. A bit of effort now could mean several peaceful hours resting, if they found a suitable spot.

It had been Sirius's idea to move along the coast where it would hopefully be easier to find food, water and shelter. Harry didn't have a clue if he was right or not, but was more than willing to go anywhere the older man wanted.

Stepping around Sirius, Harry sudden lost his footing. Had he been less tired he would have easily kept his balance, but as it was he barely managed to fall back onto his behind before starting to slide down a steep incline.

Sirius grabbed an arm, trying to stop him, but ended up tumbling over to almost land on his top instead, and the two took an impromptu journey down several metres of dirt covered rock to land in a pile on the sandy beach below.

"Bugger," said Harry, once his breath returned and the pain subsided a bit. "I'm so sorry, Sirius."

"I think I need to teach you some better swear words, Harry," said Sirius, lying on his back where he had landed after rolling off Harry. "'Bugger' doesn't really convey the depth of feeling I suspect you want to express at the moment."

“Don’t bother,” said Harry. “I think I already know them. I am just scared of Hermione thumping me everytime I use them. She’s got a mean right hook and isn’t afraid to use it. Ron always has bruises on his arms from swearing too much.”

“She sounds like a nice girl,” said Sirius. “I look forward to you introducing her to me.”

“Me too,” agreed Harry. “I imagine it’ll be a very interesting meeting – Just don’t mention anything about my missing months of school to hang out with you, ok? She’s a bit fanatical about that sort of thing.”

Sirius laughed and helped him to his feet to continue the search.

It was almost two hours later when they found the perfect place. A thick copse of brush hid the narrow entrance of a deep cave, a cave that had been inhabited before.

The only real problem they had was light.

Harry’s falcon eyes were magnificent, but were not adapted for low-light conditions. Sirius’s Grim was slightly better off, but neither of them was particularly happy to be in near complete darkness. When night fell, the blackness would be absolute.

By the dim glow of the small entrance, they found signs others had used the cave for shelter, but not for many years. Here and there were crumbling remains of wooden crates and dust filled fire pits. It was however, the first sign of human habitation they had come across since leaving the prison island.

Sirius found a half-full, foul smelling bottle of something buried in the dirt. He refused to give Harry any of it after taking an enormous swig and coughing for two minutes straight.

“Bad for you!” he told Harry hoarsely, blatantly ignoring the illogic of that statement as he took another swig.

Harry contented himself with water from a small stream dripping down in the back of the cave.

A pile of dry kindling and larger branches gave them hope for a fire, but another hour of fruitless 'rubbing together of sticks' just served to get Harry angry and frustrated.

"Damn it!" he yelled, throwing down the branches he had been using. "It never looks this hard when somebody does it on TV!"

Sirius's soft chuckle filled the chamber, echoing eerily.

"Looks like you are making a good recovery from the Dementors, if you can get that upset easily," he said. "Wasn't that long ago I would have bet my last galleon that you were never going to have enough get-up-and-go in you to get angry at a stick!"

"Can't you use magic?" Harry snapped irritably.

"Don't happen to have my wand handy," smirked Sirius. "Sorry."

"Dumbledore doesn't always need a wand," said Harry. "He can just wave his hand and make things happen. So did Quirell. Why can't you?"

"Well, I am not Dumbledore, for starters," Sirius answered, sitting up suddenly and sounding excited. "And I don't have a Dark Lord living in the back of my head, but you might be able to."

"Me?" asked Harry, suddenly worried. "What, you think I have a bloody Dark Lord in my head?"

"No, not that, but you've done accidental magic before, right?" asked Sirius. "Turning hair blue and stuff, right?"

"Yes, but that's a bit different from snapping my fingers and making ropes appear," protested Harry.

"It has been a long time since I did any, so I'd say you've the better chance at it," explained Sirius. "Look at how fast you managed to change into a turkey. Shows your magic isn't as tied to your wand as people my age. Remus thought that was part of the reason we were able to learn how to change too. We were still young - although not as young as you - when we finally managed it."

"I am not a turkey, you oversized poodle," snapped Harry without anger. "And I resent the implication that I may have a Dark Lord sharing hat space with me."

"Go on. Give it a try," encouraged Sirius, ignoring Harry's rebuke.

"How?" asked Harry. "I don't even really know how magic *with* my wand works, let alone *without* it!"

"Get angry at the stick again, just like you were a while ago, but get really, really angry. Look at it and wish it to burn. Want it like you have never wanted anything before."

"You want me to get angry at a stick? I think I waited too long to carry you out of there, Padfoot - your brain has rotted away. Either that or the stuff in that bottle you are cradling isn't what you think it is."

"If I remember rightly, it was me doing all of the carrying," answered Sirius, clutching the dirty bottle to his chest protectively, as if he was scared Harry would take it off him. "And you leave my bottle out of this."

"Yes, but I provided the motivating force," reasoned Harry.

"Just get a stick and try it before I pick one up and provide some motivating force to you, pup. At the very least, the exercise will keep *you* warm, and *me* highly entertained."

Sirius smirked and took another long swig out of his precious bottle, grimacing and almost gagging in the process as the vicious fluid burnt its way down his throat.

Harry grumbled and picked up the sticks. He didn't have anything better to do anyway, so he started rubbing them together, just as he had done before. He started letting his anger and frustration come back to him, concentrating on the branches, wishing them, no, *demanding* them, to catch alight.

He forgot about Sirius, and the cave. He ignored the ache in his muscles. Bit by bit he lost himself in the act of trying to force the branches to catch alight.

Suddenly he heard a roaring in his ears and felt a strange surge through his hands. Light exploded from the ends of the stick he was holding and the pile of kindling erupted in a huge flame that reach to the roof of the cavern before falling back down.

Harry let out an undignified shriek and threw himself backwards away from the gout of fire.

As the flames settled down to a more natural size, he scrambled to his feet and watched indignantly as Sirius howled with laughter so hard that he was forced to double over.

The sight of his godfather truly laughing warmed Harry even more than the surprise fire.

The moment Hermione had managed to get the security door open, dropping her book and fumbling the lock many times in her excitement, she threw herself into the waiting arms of her red-headed friend.

“Oh, Ron,” she cried in happiness. “I tried to come see you, but they wouldn’t let me in. They said only family were allowed, and even then it had to be prearranged with the healers assigned to your case. I tried to tell them all. I know it wasn’t Harry, especially after you stood up for him. I can’t believe you are here. How are you? When did you get out? How did you get here? What did the healers do-“

“Hermione,” said Ron, trying unsuccessfully to interrupt her babbling.

“-to you? I tried to get them to tell me, and I told them you weren’t under any unnatural influence like Lockhart and Fudge claimed, but they threatened to report me to the Aurors for spreading lies! Can you believe they called it sedition?”

“Hermione,” said Ron, again fruitlessly trying to stem the flood of words.

“I tried to visit Harry too, but they aren’t even letting Dumbledore in to see him. I sent letters but they all came back unopened-“

Finally, Ron gathered his courage and took the one action he knew would stop her ranting.

He grabbed her face between his hands, and kissed her.

One of the many issues Ron's therapy had forced him to face were the feelings he had for the girl he considered to be one of his two best friends. At an age where most boys were struggling to understand the rapid and uncontrolled changes that were starting to happen to them, Ron had been given clear guidance and counselling by professional mind healers who usually dealt with issues far worse than healthy, teenage emotions.

As an end result, Ron knew exactly what he felt for Hermione, and wasn't afraid to let her know in the most direct manner possible.

It wasn't a passionate kiss. It was more a case of just pushing his lips against hers, but it had the desired affect.

He had convinced himself that he was emotionally prepared to be rejected, but as Hermione realised what was happening, he felt her shock fade - and she kissed him back.

In that moment, in the split second the kiss changed, Ron knew, despite the ordeals he had gone through, and the belief there would be many more to come, he would die a happy man - because at least one of his dreams had come true.

"Suspecting young Mr. Potter was hiding something from me, I used my awesome natural talent for stealth and concealment to follow him. After casting some strange and obviously Dark spell on the Weasley boy to make him follow, he went straight to where I had previously determined the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets was hidden," said Gilderoy Lockhart, with the air of a man giving an acceptance speech.

Even in his spell induced, catatonic-like state, Harry felt loathing for the pompous git and his blatant self-promotional lies.

"Indeed, Mr. Lockhart-" said Lucius Malfoy, from his position in at the prosecution bench.

"Please, call me Gilderoy," interrupted Lockhart, flashing his world famous smile. "We are all friends here, are we not, Lucius?"

For the briefest of seconds, Harry saw the corner of Malfoy senior's eye twitch in what might have been annoyance, before he answered.

"Of course we are, Gilderoy. Now having determined Mr. Potter was responsible for opening the Chamber-"

"Objection!" shouted the wizard acting as Harry's advocate. "The witness said no such thing!"

Harry had no idea who the wizard was. He had barely been conscious when their interviews had taken place, but vaguely recalled hearing Dumbledore being disallowed the right to represent him.

Today was actually the first day in weeks he could even begin to think straight. Somebody told him he was being 'drugged' because he was too dangerous to be left fully aware, but Harry didn't care.

He knew that it was his fault Ginny was in a bed at St Mungos instead of in her home with her parents.

"My apologies," said Malfoy, with a slight smile. "Allow me to retract that statement."

"Gilderoy, did you witness Mr. Potter open the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Yes. I had not yet determined how to do it myself, otherwise I would have rescued the girl earlier..."

"And how did he, supposedly a mere boy barely aware of the magical world, accomplish that feat - a feat that has eluded some of the greatest wizards over the last thousand years?" asked Malfoy, looking positively gleeful.

Gilderoy stood straighter, no doubt planning to impress the audience further with his next statement.

"I suspected something from the first day I met him- you have to be pretty lucky to hide something from me you know - and I cleverly tricked him into publicly exposing himself in front of the whole school earlier in the year."

"Harry Potter is a Parslemouth, and that is how he opened Slytherin's Chamber," he announced in his best dramatic style, his voice rising to a crescendo. "He hissed at it, like a snake!"

Gasps from the audience quickly grew into a roar, but Harry didn't still didn't care.

After all, he already knew it was his fault that Ginny had been hurt.

"Sirius?" called Harry sleepily. "What other magic can be done without a wand?"

Sirius scratched his rough beard as he lay down on the makeshift bed of grass and appeared to contemplate the question.

Sirius appeared quite impressed with Harry's ability to make the fire, despite the ignoble way that it happened. Harry felt proud of his achievement and wanted to do more.

"I don't rightly know if there are any limits, but most of us can do a few bits and pieces, like the Animagus change, and Apparating of course. I never really thought about it before Azkaban – always had my wand with me before that."

"You've mentioned Apparating before. What exactly is it? How do you do it?" asked Harry.

Many of the stories Sirius had told him had bits and pieces Harry had not understood, but with only two years of magical education under his belt, that wasn't surprising. While they had been in Azkaban his curiosity had been somewhat suppressed, but now he felt his wonder and interest in magic once again growing.

"It's a way of *willing* yourself to be somewhere else. If you concentrate hard enough, your magic sort of pushes you there. It's pretty hard."

"Can you do it?" Harry asked excitedly.

"Sure, although I wasn't all that good at it. I used to Floo or fly my bike a lot instead. None of us were much chop at it actually. We could get about well enough, but it's pretty uncomfortable, and I was always scared of getting splinched."

"Eh?"

"Sometimes," the older man started to explain, as he rolled on his back to stare at the dim ceiling above them, "if you don't concentrate properly, you might leave a bit of yourself behind, or spread yourself across the countryside. I once saw a guy accidentally send his legs across the room without the rest of him, it was brilliant."

"Eeeerrrggghh!"

"Yeah, I know. It happened to me a couple of times. I left my right foot at your grandmother's place once. Had a devil of a time getting it back because your dad thought it'd be a good laugh to hide it from me. 'What's got you so *hopping* mad, Padfoot?' he kept asking."

He gave a chuckle, recalling happier times.

"I remember trying to convince Peter to try and purposely leave behind a buttock, although I can't for the life of me remember why - Seems rather odd, now I come to think about it."

"Doesn't it hurt?" asked Harry, choosing to let the buttock matter slide for the moment. "To bust off a bit of yourself I mean, and won't you bleed to death?"

"Nah, your magic keeps you sort of connected, but the shock can be pretty bad. It's easy enough to fix too, if you have a wand and the right spell."

"Oh," said Harry, realising he wasn't going to be learning how to magically jump across the country anytime soon.

A comfortable silence settled on them, broken only by the soft crackling of the fire.

“Sirius?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“Er, nothing, forget it.”

Harry watched Sirius rolled over to look at him. The fire was still going nicely, thanks to some careful nurturing and a few larger branches they had dragged inside.

Several days camped in relative safety had done wonders for their general state of health, and cooked food definitely agreed with them. Padfoot had even managed to find and dig out some wild potatoes and other assorted vegetables from what looked like a very old, abandoned farm further inland.

His canine senses also helped him find and dig up several more bottles of dubious content from the sandy floor of the cavern that had apparently once been used as either a smuggler’s storage cellar or a teenager’s camping spot, but Sirius still refused to share them with his godson.

When the huge dog had managed to bring down a feral goat, they feasted like kings.

Sirius was still gaunt, and he still had a wild, half savage look about him that was not helped by whatever was in the bottles, but he no longer looked like a walking corpse.

Harry knew he too was still far from his usual weight, but he felt much stronger for having several full meals and plenty of rest away from the Dementors and the cold.

“All right, what is it, Harry? You know if you don’t ask now, it is just going to bug you all night anyway.”

Harry nodded, knowing Sirius was right, but not wanting to ruin the moment. He regretted having opened his mouth at all.

“You’re wondering what we are going to do now, aren’t you?” prompted Sirius.

Months spent with his soul bared meant that Harry probably could not hide anything from Sirius. The man had listened to the ranting and pleading, had talked him through the darkest depression, and heard the worst he had to offer. After all of that, Harry knew he had no secrets, and nothing to fear either. It was a unique feeling for the boy: trust.

“What should we do?” he asked. “I mean, while I will do almost anything to keep out of jail, a part of me wants to find Malfoy and kill him – Fudge and Lockhart too. Another part of me wants to run away and forget everything – to start over, with you, somewhere where they have never heard of the boy-who-lived-to-turn-evil or whatever stupid name they are calling me now.”

Sirius sighed.

“I know exactly how you feel, Harry. I desperately want to find Pettigrew and extract a dozen years of Azkaban from his mangy hide, but I also want to keep you safe, no matter what.”

They lay in silence for a few moments, letting the warmth of the small fire and comforting roar of the distant sea lull them.

“So what should we do?”

“I don’t know, but I know we are going to have to move out of here eventually because sleeping on a straw bed is driving me crazy with itchiness,” answered Sirius, suddenly scratching behind his ear in a very dog-like manner.

“Could be fleas,” suggested Harry, earning a dark look from the escaped convict.

“Besides, what are the chances of us finding a specific rat amongst the whole rat population of the world?” asked Sirius. “He is probably living a life of luxury in whatever passes for a rat kingdom.”

Harry rolled onto his back and closed his eyes, slowly drifting off to sleep. A stray memory, triggered by Sirius’s words, rose to the barely conscious surface of his mind.

“Did I ever tell you Ron has a pet rat? Fat and lazy thing it is too. It did bite Goyle though. Only thing I have ever seen it do besides sleep and eat. Ron tried turning it yellow once, but the spell was a joke from his brothers.”

Sirius chuckled quietly, obviously drifting off to sleep as well.

“Of course I suppose I had better never introduce you to him,” said Harry, after letting out a huge yawn and opening his eyes again.

The firelight flickered on the roof of the cave, casting hypnotising shadows amongst the slowly drifting smoke. Gentle currents of air wafted the smoke out of various openings to the cave, including the entrance. Sirius had checked and reported the smoke was not visible from the outside as it quickly got lost in the sea spray and ocean wind currents.

“You’ll probably go all ‘Grim’ on him and swallow him in one bite,” he said, not sure why he felt the need to explain.

“Only if he is missing a toe,” mumbled Sirius sleepily. “I’ve only got a thing against rats that don’t have nature’s gift of a full compliment of digits.”

“How did you know that?” asked Harry, after yawning again. His thoughts began to drift, to memories of happier days as he caught himself thinking once again of the friends he had left behind.

“Know what?” asked Sirius, dragging Harry’s mind back to their conversation.

“That Scabbers is missing a toe,” mumbled Harry in answer, barely awake.

The peaceful silence was shattered only moments later.

“WHAT?”

Severus Snape was not a patient man.

Despite his reputation for brewing potions with an exactness that bordered on obsessive, he absolutely hated it when something defied his will and did not instantly obey him. It was the main reason he despised the insolent brats he was forced to try and teach each day.

Like the way the door in front of him was ignoring his every effort to open it; the door sealing the Chamber of Secrets.

Dumbledore specifically gave him the task of finding and opening the almost mythical room hidden beneath the school by the greatest of the four founders, Salazar Slytherin, but the recalcitrant potions professor would have tried to do it even without the mandate from the Headmaster.

Knowing where to find the entrance removed the greatest obstacle that prevented previous searchers from accessing the secret room, but the door that could only be opened by somebody speaking the language of the snakes made a formidable barrier.

It could not be easily bypassed by tunnelling around it, as he had done with the magically protected entrance; the spells and wards surrounding the chamber made it at least as strong as the very walls of Hogwarts itself.

If only the insufferable brat had left it open, Snape thought to himself. Trust the idiot boy to get nothing right.

In the months since the abduction and near murder of Ginny Weasley, Severus worked many hours on getting into the Chamber, supposedly to retrieve evidence to support the boy's case.

Snape was not actually interested in helping the boy-who-lived-to-be-a-pain-in-the-arse.

He had in fact at first taken his time with opening the door, confident a stint in the low security sections of Azkaban would teach the arrogant spawn of James Potter not to meddle in matters beyond his station, but as the days became weeks, and then months, Severus became more and more obsessed with besting the seemingly impenetrable barrier.

After all, it was not everyday you could walk on sacred ground, and the secret chamber of Salazar Slytherin certainly qualified as sacred ground to Severus.

He did not really believe he would find a even a small basilisk behind the door, as the boy claimed, and definitely not the corpse of a forty foot monster, but magical peril-sensitive goggles adorned his eyes just in case, ready to turn black and filter the petrifying gaze of the beast, if it existed.

Dumbledore insisted he search for the diary, although Snape failed to see how a ruined book, no doubt filled with the meaningless meanderings of a teenage girl, was going to help Potter.

He was determined to best the challenge represented by the Chamber, and tearing open a hole in the floor of the bathroom to get down the filthy pipe had been ridiculously easy, giving him largely false expectations of his ability to get into the inner sanctum.

So, after months of spell casting and research, then yet more fruitless spell casting, he now once again stood in front of the door, but this time with a plan that amounted to a brilliant act of desperation.

“*Serpensortia!*” he cast, waving his wand in exact patterns.

A large snake appeared out of the end of his wand and fell to the floor, hissing loudly.

“*Imperio,*” he said, forcing his mind to dominate the weak will of the conjured beast.

“Tell the door to open,” he commanded.

The snake hissed angrily.

And the door responded with a loud click.

Vernon and Petunia Dursley’s testimony caused almost as much controversy as Harry’s arrest.

They were more than willing to testify about Harry's perceived delinquencies, but when the truth of the boy-who-lived's childhood emerged, they failed to understand the outrage of the assembled wizards.

Even the prosecutor, the immaculately groomed and well spoken Lucius Malfoy, seemed astounded beyond belief, although Harry knew he had personally convinced them to appear in front of the court to tell their tale to begin with.

"You locked him in a cupboard?" yelled Malfoy, looking outraged at the suggestion, as if he hadn't already been shown the very place during one of his many visits to the Dursley home. "Did you not consider the consequences of what such an action might have on a child, on a baby?"

"But, but, he needed it. He deserved it. Can't you see? We had to try and stop him from becoming like his mother – a freak!" Vernon spluttered, looking like he was trying to understand why things weren't going how they had planned.

Malfoy must have impressed them with promises of wealth and fame for coming forward to tell the world how their despicable nephew needed to be handled, but instead of the understanding and praise he was obviously expecting, Vernon was under attack for his attitude and actions.

"A FREAK? Is that what you called him? Is that how you treated him?" demanded Malfoy, turning to face the audience. "Is it no wonder the boy sought to unleash terror on the world, when his guardians, the people Albus Dumbledore assured us were going to protect him, locked the defenceless child in a cupboard and starved him?"

He whirled dramatically to face the assembled high court, his face a perfect image of righteous outrage.

"Is it no wonder that the boy-who-lived was desperate to strike out when he had never, at any point in his short life, had control over anything, not even when he was allowed to visit the bathroom? You need not look far to see where he went wrong - you just have to look

at his role-models!” he screamed, pointing his finger dramatically at the quivering Dursley patriarch.

“Look at the Muggle filth that treated our saviour worse than a House-elf. Look at this pig of a man and his detestable family. Look at the real reason why a young Pureblood witch lies forever in a coma in St. Mungos and a hero has fallen from grace to become a demon. LOOK AT WHAT MUGGLES WILL DO TO WIZARDS WHEN THEY ARE GIVEN POWER OVER THEM!”

The audience was in an uproar, screaming for the blood of the two people quivering together. They had thought they were there to condemn Harry; it never occurred to them that they themselves might have to answer for their neglect in his upbringing.

“I say take them away and lock them up. Remove the other unfortunate child from their care before he becomes any more of a monster! MAKE THE FILTHY MUGGLES PAY FOR WHAT THEY HAVE DONE.”

For Harry, it was actually the high point of the trial.

The countryside raced by unseen under Harry as he rode the strong, ocean-driven current of warm air. The setting sun bled red-gold clouds through the arch of the sky, to slowly fade into the encroaching blackness where lonely stars blinked weakly through gaps in the curtain of night.

Sirius insisted Harry spend at least an hour each day learning to be a bird, despite the disaster that might happen should a wave of searching Dementors happen upon them.

Not that Harry minded, but he was getting more and more anxious to move on.

The revelation that Peter Pettigrew was masquerading as Ron’s rat, Scabbers, almost sent both of the fugitives racing to extract revenge. In the end, only the fact they truly didn’t know where they were, or where they needed to go, stopped them.

Sirius decided they needed to find a town or some sign of civilization, and the best way to do that was for Harry to scout one out.

A flock of startled seagulls erupted from the trees below Harry in a sudden roar of beating wings. No doubt his outline against the darkening sky was instinctively recognised as that of a bird of prey.

Resisting the temptation to swoop amongst the fleeing birds and grab one for dinner, Harry banked and began to follow the dirt road he had spotted the day before. Maybe today he would find where the road led to, since nobody made a road in the middle of nowhere without reason.

Sirius had become a trifle fanatical now. Whereas before he seemed to only be escaping because Harry would not have survived much longer in the jail, now he had become driven to seek revenge, or justice, as he called it.

Harry may have had daydreams about murdering Malfoy and Lockhart, but faced with the real possibility of assisting somebody take another person's life, he found himself feeling quite hesitant about it.

"Okay," Sirius said, after Harry explained his discomfort. "I'll just beat him up a bit and then hand him over to the Auror's, anonymously. Is that better?"

Harry just looked at him disbelievingly.

Sirius tried his most innocent look. "What?" he asked.

"You are really going to let him live?" asked Harry sceptically.

"If that's what you want, that's what I'll do," Sirius answered. "I don't think I was ever really going to kill him anyway."

"Then why have you been practicing burning holes into that stick-doll you have been calling Wormtail?" asked Harry, nodding towards the effigy Sirius had spent hours constructing.

Sirius guiltily looked at the half-burnt remains he had impaled on a branch over the fire and gave a negligent shrug. "Ever heard of Voodoo?"

A sudden rise in the salty taste of the breeze let Harry know he was again nearing the ocean. A glimmer of movement on the road below brought his attention back to the present.

There was a car was driving along the track.

Albus Dumbledore was angry, very angry. Not that you could tell from his voice alone, but an observant man would not miss the obvious tightness around his glaring eyes, or the exasperated tone he was using as he spoke.

Unfortunately, Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, was not an observant man.

"Cornelius," the Headmaster said calmly. "I have here before you, proof that Gilderoy Lockhart lied during the trial. He claims to have locked Slytherin's beast, alive, in its chamber, but we have opened the door and found the corpse, just as Harry said. I fail to see how you can discount this evidence."

"Evidence? I don't see any evidence," Fudge blustered. "All I see is proof that Lockhart battled the beast and it must have died from the wounds he gave it."

"And the diary? How can you deny the existence of the diary? Gilderoy claims he saw no such artefact, and yet I hold it here in my hands..."

"It's just an empty book, Albus," said Fudge, completely oblivious to the growing anger of the powerful man in front of him. "It could have come from anywhere. Potter himself could have taken it with him as part of his cover story! You really can't go around making these claims against a popular and influential person like Gilderoy without something to back them up."

“If I made these accusations public, the backlash would be horrendous. I might even be thrown from office, and I know you are holding onto your position at the school by the skin of your teeth. Lucius is already hinting that Gilderoy has been showing an interest in running for Minister next election, and that is only a few months away.”

“I am sorry, Albus, but unless you have something more substantial than an empty book and a broken fang, I will not re-open the case, especially since the boy is obviously in league with Dark forces,” the rotund man said. “How else could he and Sirius Black have escaped?”

Albus’s rage finally started to show in signs that even the foolish could not fail to see. A visible aura of power began to crackle the air around the Headmaster as he rose from the seat in front of the Minister’s impressive wooden desk.

“And you have still not been able to adequately explain how it came to be that a minor, a twelve year old boy no less, who had been sentenced to a term in low security, somehow ended up in the deepest cell of the harshest, high-security prison in the world. Have you Minister?”

Fudge paled at the raw power the Headmaster was displaying. It was so rare that the ancient man ever showed his might that it was easy to forget exactly why most of the wizarding world held him in awe.

“We are still investigating it,” squeaked the suddenly terrified Minister.

“Be sure that you make a *thorough* job of it, Cornelius,” said the Headmaster, in a voice that left no doubt as to how serious he really was. “For I fear should you not perform this one task adequately, your remaining time in the political arena will be measured in days and not years. Good day to you.”

Without waiting for a reply, Dumbledore turned and left the expansive offices and a gaping Minister for Magic behind. He strode through the Ministry without seeing the people scrambling to get out of the way of the obviously angry wizard, and didn’t notice he was still radiating a

frightful amount of power until he had re-entered Hogwarts and returned to his office.

Slamming the diary and the broken Basilisk fang on the desk, Dumbledore was sorely tempted to revert to the acts of a much younger man and smash something.

Instead, he utilised over a century of practiced skill, and gained control of his rage, sinking into the plush Headmaster's chair with a loud sigh after only a few moments of concentration.

Fawkes crooned soothingly; the uplifting song of the phoenix replaced by a slow, sorrowful lament that was still somehow comforting.

"I know, Fawkes," said the Headmaster, as his rage subsided and his grief rose. "I know. Let us hope young Mr. Potter has somehow convinced Black to join his side, and not the other way around."

The diary lay open on his desk, its blank pages mocking the venerable man silently.

He didn't know how long he sat like that, looking at the empty page and listening to Fawkes's soft singing, but suddenly he leaned forward and grabbed a quill from the desk.

My name is Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore he wrote in his usual, flowing handwriting across the top of the open book.

The words sat, stubbornly refusing to do anything. Just as he was about to toss the quill away in frustration, the ink suddenly faded from view - as if it was sinking into the page.

The Headmaster gasped, and Fawkes abruptly stopped his melancholy song with a startled and completely uncharacteristic squawk, as a single word slowly floated into view in an untidy scrawl.

Headmaster?

"Are you sure this is not going to hurt?" Harry asked again.

"I am sure. Now quit worrying because you are making me nervous," answered Sirius.

"Making *you* nervous?" mumbled Harry. "You should try it from *my* point of view."

They were standing in the middle of their recent home; the smugglers cave. It would take a particularly skilful eye to find any traces of their humble abode from the outside now, since they had spent half the day blocking the entrance with rocks and removing any other signs of their habitation.

Sirius didn't want somebody stumbling onto their hideout and figuring out anything about them, not after the near disastrous encounter with the campers.

Unable to find anything loose at the campsite that might help them pinpoint their location, Sirius had changed into a human and approached the people on foot. His story was going to be that he had fallen off a ship and swum ashore, but it only took one look at him for the camp to erupt in an uproar.

"It's that escaped murder, the one that has been on the telly - Sirius Black!" yelled one of the Muggles.

Sirius didn't wait around to find out what a telly was, and immediately ran off, changing shape and loping away in the darkness.

"I just can't understand why we don't just go in our animal forms," said Harry, almost petulantly.

Sirius gave a loud sigh and sat down on a flattened rock that had been doubling as a table. The morning sun was barely filtering in, making the cave almost as dark as it usually was at night.

"Look," said the older man wearily. "I don't really want to do this either, but if we try to get away on foot, we will likely get caught. Even if it takes those Muggles all day to get to where that they can call the

authorities, the minute word gets out Aurors will be all over this place, and they will bring more than just Dementors with them..."

"Oh," said Harry.

Dementors alone might be fooled by the animal forms, but with wizards also searching an area the duo were known to have recently been in, they would almost certainly get seen.

"Maybe I could fly somewhere and you could Apparate to me?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Don't know how to do that," admitted Sirius. "I have only ever Apparated to somewhere I have been before."

The older man stood up and held out his hand.

"Come on," he urged. "Trust me!"

Harry gave a loud sigh and took Sirius's outstretched hand.

"I do, Sirius – I trust you with my life," admitted Harry honestly, but then a smirk curled the corners of his mouth. "But if you leave one of my buttocks behind, I am going to make you pay, and do you have to take that blasted bottle with you?"

Sirius laughed and brought Harry into a hug. "Don't worry, Tweety," he reassured. "I am sure Padfoot's nose will be able to find every tiny bit of you, eventually. Now hold on tight. Ready? On three. One, two -"

Suddenly Harry felt as if the whole universe was collapsing onto him, squeezing him down into an infinitely small point. He clutched Sirius tightly, desperate not to lose the grip on his godfather as the horrible sensation engulfed him, before it suddenly reversed in something akin to an explosion.

In the blink of an eye, he felt himself return to normal.

Bright sunlight burst around them, momentarily blinding him as he let go of Sirius to protect his eyes from the light, and staggered backwards.

“– three,” completed Sirius.

“WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO THAT FOR?” cried Harry, furiously rubbing his eyes and blinking rapidly. “I WASN’T READY!”

Sirius laughed.

“Yeah, I know. That was kind of the point,” he said. “You should have seen the look on your face.”

Seeing Harry’s furious, but squinty gaze, Sirius relented a bit.

“Sorry, Harry,” he said, trying to sound apologetic. “I just thought it might go easier if you weren’t all tensed up and nervous. You know, like when somebody has to pull a thorn out of your paw, and they do it when you aren’t ready so that you don’t get all worked up expecting the pain and overreact...”

Harry’s eyes started to adjust to the light that he now realised was only bright because moments before they had been standing in an almost pitch-black cave.

Sirius didn’t seem to have been affected by the sudden change in brightness at all. He was standing where he had appeared, watching Harry and trying in vain to look sorry. The huge grin that kept appearing on his face despite his struggles gave him away.

“Did it work?” Harry asked, nervously checking to make sure he still had all of his limbs.

“I think so,” answered Sirius, sounding slightly dubious as he started padding himself down. Suddenly he looked worried. “Hang on...”

To Harry’s shocked disbelief, the Marauder then made a great show of pulling the tattered waistband of his pants as far out as it would go; evidently to check he was in deed completely ‘intact’.

“Ah, good,” the man sighed, as if in great relief. “The fortune and future of the Noble House of Black is safe and sound.”

“There is something so wrong with you,” said Harry, shaking his head but unable to stop a grin from spreading across his own face at Sirius’s antics. His godfather certainly had a knack for making him smile.

“You have no idea, pup,” agreed Sirius, with a smile. “No idea at all.”

“So where are we, anyway?” asked Harry, paying attention to their surroundings for the first time.

They were in the middle of a small clearing in a forest. The light that, mere moments ago, Harry had considered blindingly bright, was actually the soft glow of the sun filtered by the tall surrounding trees.

“We should be about a mile away from an old hunting cabin where the Marauders spent a few holidays after leaving Hogwarts,” answered Sirius, as he looked around, trying to get his bearings. “It’s been a while, but I’d say the cabin will still be there, even if nobody has been using it. We put a lot of charms on it to keep it protected, and hidden, so it might take a while for me to remember how exactly to get to it.”

Harry looked around, trying to guess what it was Sirius was searching for. There didn’t appear to be any obvious trails leading out of the clearing, and he suspected the memories Sirius was desperately trying to recall were unwilling victims of the Dementors, just as he himself knew he would have difficulty remembering many of his days at Hogwarts.

He sat down on the soft loamy ground to wait, revelling in the crisp freshness of the light breeze that, for the first time in a seemingly very long while, carried no hint of the salty sea.

In every direction, he could hear the forest come alive with animal noises. Sirius had warned him that Apparating was usually noisy, but he had been too caught up in the mischievous man’s trick to notice how silent it had been when they first arrived.

Now that they had quietened down, the animals that must have been startled into silence by their noisy appearance, were once again returning to their normal activities. It was a welcome relief from the incessant thunder of the ocean and screeching of seabirds.

“Here we go,” said Sirius suddenly. Harry hadn’t noticed he had moved over to the far side of the clearing and was peering into a large bush. “This has grown since I was last here, but there is the marker.”

Harry trotted over to see what Sirius was talking about. Hidden under the numerous branches and thick foliage of the plant, was an unremarkable pile of rocks.

“You sure?” he asked, highly sceptical of the supposed ‘signpost’. His question earned a wounded look from Sirius that was more suited to a puppy than on a supposed merciless killer. “Okay, I believe you. Stop with the eyes already and let’s go.”

With a soft pop, Padfoot loped off into the forest. A spit second later, a falcon followed.

They came upon the cabin a few minutes later, the thick forest making barely a dent on the pace of the enormous hound and his winged companion.

At first, Harry had been confused when Sirius suddenly slowed down and then stopped completely. Thinking the Animagus may have lost the trail, Harry swooped down to land on a branch not far above the Grimm’s head.

He was about to change back into his human form to ask Sirius what was going on, when he noticed the small house. It was cleverly hidden and no doubt had magic aiding in its inconspicuousness. Only his feathered form’s impressive eyesight enabled him to spot it, but once he knew it was there, he could see it clearly.

It would have been entirely possible for a person to walk within touching distance of the wooden shack and not notice it, especially with the shutters over the windows.

Padfoot did not change, but cautiously started sniffing around, as if searching for a scent. Harry had seen his godfather do this before, but usually when trying to find dinner. Now he appeared to be checking for something else, since Harry doubted anything had taken up residence in the solid looking cabin.

Standing at the door, Sirius changed back to his human form and waved for Harry to join him. Harry flew down to land next to him, changing back into a human just before hitting the ground so that he landed lightly on his feet.

“Show off,” said Sirius, smiling. “Nobody’s been here in while, at least not that I can tell. We won’t be able to get in through the door, since it’s magically locked, but luckily we left a way in, just in case Peter ever locked himself outside without his wand, again.”

He ran his hands over the top and one side of the door frame, stopping in several places until he found what he was looking for. Deftly pressing down in two places at the same time, Harry heard a lock click, and the shutters on window next to him sprang open.

“Welcome to ‘The Lodge’, Harry,” said Sirius, bowing and sweeping one arm gallantly as he motioned for Harry to climb in.

Inside, the place was a ruin.

Once it had been a comfortable and reasonably spacious cabin. A large fireplace dominated one end of the main room with doors leading off to two bedrooms, judging from the ruins of beds and bedding in one. The wreck of a sink and some cupboards near the fireplace was all that was left of a small kitchen. While it would have been a bit cramped for four people, it was plenty big enough for two to live in without constantly tripping over each other.

However, every piece of furniture, including the door to the second room, was smashed, as if a large animal had been trapped inside and vented its anger on what were once chairs, tables, beds and cupboards.

Sirius stood perfectly still just inside of the unlocked window and looked stunned at the destruction. Only the stone fireplace looked

whole, but even that had been damaged a bit, with a few of its bricks torn from the surround and the mantle missing altogether.

Harry gingerly ran his fingers down a series of gouges in the back of the door they had been unable to open.

"What's done this?" he asked. When he received no answer he turned back to Sirius as asked again, louder. "Sirius? What happened here? What is this place?"

Sirius shook his head sadly.

"This is where we used to come with Moony, nearly every month, on the nights of a full moon. We would stay up here for a few days, running with him in the forest like we used to do back at Hogwarts. This cabin is actually your great grandpa's. He often brought your dad up here when he was young, 'camping'."

Harry felt his breath catch in his throat. *This cabin had belonged to his family!*

"Even after James and Lilly got married, we used to come here so that Remus wouldn't have to spend the night locked alone in a dungeon. I was hoping Moony still used it occasionally, and that we would find it stocked with food and clothing, but it looks like he decided not to go outside anymore and spent at least one change inside. I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't know it would be like this. Or maybe I did and I have forgotten - I don't know what I was thinking."

Harry felt uncomfortable at the forlorn look Sirius was giving him. He could tell Sirius was heartbroken over the virtual destruction of a place full of memories he must have held dear.

"Let's not give up too soon," he said, trying to sound hopeful. "We still might find something useful, and at least we have a safe place to stay for a while."

Sirius forced a smile and turned back to the destruction.

"Yeah," he said, sounding anything except hopeful. "Maybe."

As it turned out, Harry was more right than either of them could have believed.

At first they moved around the junk, kicking and moving pieces aside as they half-heartedly searched for anything useful. After discovering some hardy cups and plates, Sirius decided they needed to get organised in order to achieve anything, and began piling up the broken furniture near the fireplace, to use as kindling for Harry's fire lighting 'trick', if they didn't find any flint or matches.

Soon they started finding many other small day to day items that had escaped destruction, such as forks and knives and even a thick blanket.

"This would be so much easier if we had a wand!" growled Harry, sucking on his finger as yet another splinter imbedded itself.

"Of course," said Sirius, his face lighting up in wonder, "A Wand."

He suddenly jumped up and grabbed Harry excitedly

"There used to be a wand here, your great granddad's wand. James put it in a glass case above the fireplace. He refused to let it be buried with Grandpa Potter and stole it out from under the undertaker's nose. Brilliant!" he shouted jumping up and down like an excited child. "Now we just have to find it!"

Letting Harry go, Sirius threw himself into the task of cleaning up, with an enthusiasm that had been lacking before.

Not for the first time, Harry seriously worried about Sirius's sanity. His time in Azkaban had definitely derailed the man, and at times like this, Harry wondered if he was seeing the effects of long exposure to the happiness consuming beasts, or Sirius reverting to a younger version of himself - one about eight years old.

Still, having a wand would be major improvement in their situation, and they were cleaning the place up anyway, so the possibility was pretty exciting.

As he bent to pick up another armload of rubbish, the door to the cabin suddenly burst open and the dim silhouette of a robed man holding a wand menacingly filled the doorway.

“Hold it right there,” said the figure, pointing the wand directly at Harry’s head and stopping him in his tracks, armload of wood and all. “I’ve got you now, Black.”

Sirius stood upright from where he had been rummaging. The wand swished away to point at him, but flicked back to Harry when he involuntarily gasped.

Any moment, Harry expected to see the telltale flash of light as a spell flew from the end of the crooked stick to incapacitate him. Any second now, he knew he was going to hear an incantation and would once again wake up in his tiny cell in Azkaban.

Instead he heard Sirius whisper in a soft, almost hopeful voice.

“Moony?”

Ron leaned back into the soft lounge in the Granger’s sitting room. He still found the modern muggle furnishings unusual to look at, but could not deny the improved comfort offered over his own home’s somewhat threadbare chairs.

“There’s no doubt, I am being followed,” he told the bushy haired witch sitting next to him. “It’s not the same one today, but somebody has been watching me since I left the Burrow this morning. I am sure of it.”

He shook his head regretfully.

“I am so sorry, Hermione. I didn’t even consider that they would follow me around. Now they know you are involved with me, they will probably watch you too.”

Hermione leaned forward and placed a hand on his knee. They had been seeing each other daily since Ron had first appeared on her

doorstep. Her shock had quickly turned to amazement at some of the changes in her friend. Although he was still undoubtedly Ron, he was like an older, more mature Ron, and she found it surprisingly pleasing.

He still laughed at silly things, and liked to act his age, but many of his more annoying aspects had been smoothed out, making him so much easier to get along with.

And he had kissed her! That set the tone for their new relationship, right from the outset.

"I certainly hope you are not telling me you regret coming to see me? Especially not after sweeping me off my feet like that!" she laughed.

She was only half joking. He had kissed her, awkwardly for sure, but softly, tenderly, and in her mind, quite thoroughly. Not in her wildest dreams had she ever expected him to do such a thing on his own! It was almost like the trashy romance novels she previously distained.

"I can't possibly go looking for Harry now," said Ron bitterly.

He stood up abruptly and started pacing the room, more than a shadow of his old self rising to the surface as his anger began to boil.

"Even if I could find him, the second I get close, they will know and come swooping in. There has got to be a way!" he growled in frustration.

The loyalty that Ron had shown Harry had also taken Hermione by surprise. With half of the wizarding world, including some of his own family, trying to convince him that he had been misled by the boy-who-lived, Ron had refused to buckle and withstood their coercion.

He apparently learned a great deal about himself through his therapy, and showed unexpected depth and compassion, but nobody had been able to change his opinion regarding Harry's guilt.

Hermione herself had been largely ignored in the aftermath of Ginny's abduction, except to be portrayed in that pathetic rag, the Daily Prophet, as a betrayed victim - the person who had discovered Harry's secret and was subsequently petrified and almost killed - but

nobody had *really* tried to convince her that she had been taken in by Harry's false persona.

Nobody had really cared what a *Mudblood* believed.

Written off as love-sick follower of Harry's, even her professors had ignored her suggestions and advice, trusting the Headmaster would get to the truth of the matter and see justice done.

Hermione bowed to their wishes and stood aside to watch the train wreck of Harry's trial and the joke of Ron's 'mental assessment' as it ruined the lives of her two best friends, and by extension, her own.

One of her real regrets was that she had only slapped Draco Malfoy when he laughed about how his dad was getting paid more in a week than Ron's dad earned in year, to do something he would have been happy to do for free.

She sincerely wished she had kicked the young Malfoy heir in the robes instead.

"Where is he, Hermione?" asked Ron. "Where could he go? He has never been anywhere, he has no other friends. Where could he go, and why would he go anywhere with the bloke who betrayed his parents?"

Hermione considered her next words carefully. Ron appeared a lot more mature, but he still had a temper.

"Well, if we are both being watched, we can't go looking for him, and if he comes to us-"

"He is not likely to, not after the way they made our testimonies look at the trial. It wouldn't surprise me if they convinced him we turned on him too. He probably thinks we are blaming him for Ginny," interrupted Ron.

"If he comes to us, either here or at the Burrow, he will get caught. So there is only one thing to do," continued Hermione, ignoring Ron's words even though the truth in them terrified her.

“We have to go back to Hogwarts.”

Albus leant back in his chair and considered the arrogant posturing figure of Gilderoy Lockhart as the man stood before him, and once again wondered if refusing to become Minister of Magic all those years ago had been the right choice.

Moments before, Lockhart had sauntered into the Headmaster's office to give his resignation, citing the need to 'best serve the public' as his reason for leaving his post early.

“You do realise you will lose your pay and remaining benefits, do you not, Gilderoy?” Albus asked.

Truth be told, he was not sorry to be seeing the last of the man. Only his desperate need for somebody to take the DADA teaching post, and the growing pressure from the populace after the fraud's supposed 'capture' of Harry Potter the year before, had kept him from firing Lockhart outright.

The students had reported a distinct improvement on the man's teaching this year though, possibly because of his now famous encounter with the 'beast of Slytherin'; an encounter Albus knew to be entirely false, but it may also have had something to do with the inordinate amount of time now spent in the company of Lucius Malfoy.

“Of course, Albus, but money is of little concern to me, when my adoring public demands I take up the mantle of leading the magical world to a new and greater future!” said Lockhart, raising his hand in the air, as if to impress the Headmaster with the nobleness of his cause.

Albus suspected money was one of Gilderoy's primary concerns, and running for public office with the support of Lucius Malfoy was sure to be profitable, to some.

The Headmaster knew exactly what kind of a person the senior Malfoy was; he had come very close to challenging the foul man to a duel after the farce that had been Harry Potter's trial. Nobody had known

of the extraordinary lengths Malfoy had gone to ensure Harry was convicted. Albus had been uncovering the facts, slowly but steadily, and they painted an altogether sickening picture of corruption, intimidation and falsehood.

“Although I am disappointed that you have chosen to leave us in the middle of the school year, I am not one who would willingly hold anybody back from their *destiny*,” he said, lowering his head to look at the now former DADA professor over the top of his spectacles. “And I am convinced you will surely meet your destiny in the not-too-distant future, Gilderoy.”

His barely concealed barb was rewarded by a slight flash of worry on Lockhart’s face as his ever-present grin faltered for a moment, but it quickly disappeared as his usual award winning, incredibly bright, teeth-displaying smile reappeared.

“Thank you, Albus. I am sure I will. Farewell.”

With a swish of his gaudy cloak, Gilderoy Lockhart swept from the Headmaster’s office.

Albus released a sigh of relief to be free of the man, even if it did mean he was once again short of a much needed professor.

Rising from his desk, he strode to the far side of the room where an array of books and parchments were piled almost haphazardly on a shelf. Behind the ungainly looking stack, a quill was slowly copying lines of text from a large book, into a much smaller, rather battered one.

As the smaller page filled up, the ink would fade away, as if sinking into the little book, before the quill returned to the top to continue its transcription of a new page. In a few hours he would need to change the book that was being copied from. A pile of previously selected materials was already waiting its turn.

It would soon again be time to spend a few minutes writing in the Dark magical object, but for now he hoped the constant flow of words would keep its inhabitant busy.

Briefly he considered mixing in some less relevant texts, maybe a Daily Prophet or even a Quibbler or two, but then decided to stick to his original careful choices.

Satisfied with the progress of the strange arrangement, the Headmaster returned to his desk and dipped a rather worn quill into a pot of ink before beginning to draft a letter onto a new piece of parchment.

It was a few months earlier than he had planned, but he already knew what he was going to write, and who he was going to write it to.

In hindsight, staying on as Headmaster had definitely been the right thing to do. It was, after all, a very responsible and demanding position.

In a corner of a dingy sub-basement, a small figure, clothed only in the tattered remains of a disgustingly dirty tea towel, grovelled in the accumulated dirt of the seldom used room.

Pitiful sobs of anguish were coming from it, as it hunched over and appeared to be trying to make itself into a ball. Broken and bloodied hands covered the battered head of what had once been a servile House-elf but was now barely recognisable as much more than a bundle of discarded refuse.

“Dobby is a bad elf,” it moaned in a pitiful voice. “Dobby let Harry Potter down. Dobby deserves to die.”

Every now and then it could feel the call of its masters; the evil ones who brutalised him and his kind, but it refused to attend the summons.

“Dobby should kill himself, he should,” sobbed the elf. “He is not fit to be called a House-elf. He is nothing.”

The torture he had endured for the sum and total of his life in Malfoy Manor had long ago driven him to the edge of what passed as sanity in the rest of his race, but now he had gone beyond being merely

strange, and was well into territories other elves told cautionary tales to youngsters about.

Dobby was dying.

He refused to serve his bonded family anymore, and the guilt made the magic inherent in his blood slowly rip him apart. Whether it took days, weeks, or months, his body was failing, and soon enough he would succumb to the curse of the bonding and pay the ultimate price for choosing not to serve his masters.

Or so he told himself.

In his heart, in the deep places that made him unique and individual, he no longer considered himself a Malfoy House-elf, and hadn't for a while now.

Weakened by starvation, Dobby felt his end coming, and was forced to face his most hidden secret.

In his soul, he was now, and for evermore, nobody's House-elf.

As the elf's sobs grew weaker, and his eyes closed for what he expected to be the last time, he almost smiled in the knowledge that he achieved his lifelong ambition.

He was free.

Unseen by any eyes except those of the few rats scattered through the mostly empty room, a brief glow of magic flared, driving the shadows from every corner of the room before fading away as if it had never existed.

Remus Lupin was in a rage.

A ward he had set up a long time ago had been triggered, warning him with a slight tingling of his wand, that somebody had broken into one of the few places he felt attached to.

Never mind that he hadn't been inside the cabin for a number of years, or that the last time he had transformed before being able to lock himself in the room he had prepared, and had then destroyed much that had been sentimental to him.

Forget that the shame of his actions had driven him from there, never to return.

Somebody was trespassing on sacred ground, and he had a fairly good idea who it was; Sirius Black, the man most directly responsible for the destruction of Remus's life.

The betrayal and subsequent murder of the young werewolf's friends had devastated him. Just when he had truly began to believe there was a life to be had, despite his cursed affliction, it had all been ripped from him like the shallow promise he had always feared it was.

And that made him angry - very angry.

It didn't help that he was mere hours away from again transforming into the beast either.

Leaving the safe house he had been prepared to spend the night in, he Apparated into the familiar if almost forgotten clearing, and stealthily made his way to the cabin.

In a moment of clarity he realised he should have called for help - brought others with him to ensure Black did not escape, but his rage clouded his thinking and demanded he confront the betrayer alone.

What he hadn't really expected, as he burst the door of the cabin open ready to confront and probably kill his one-time best friend, was Harry.

Intellectually, he was prepared to face the boy, but in his heart he had not expected him to look so much like his long dead friend - the boy's father James.

The moment he opened the door he had been ready to stun the convict and his obviously brainwashed accomplice, but the sight of

the doppelganger of James made him pause, a pause that could have been fatal if Sirius had taken advantage of it.

Instead, the escapee had stood by, patiently waiting while Remus took in the sight.

"He looks just like James, doesn't he?" asked Black, shocking him out of his stupor.

"Hold it right there, Black," said Remus, swinging his wand around to point at the older man again. "Move and you're dead."

Sirius stood still, his arms relaxed by his side.

"Give me five minutes, Moony. Just five minutes to explain, and then I'll do anything you want, but you have to promise me you won't let them take Harry back to Azkaban – it will kill him," said Black

Remus could tell the boy was ready to protest, to argue against Black's noble sounding proposal, but that was only to be expected; Black had somehow convinced the child to go with him. Fiery outrage at the man for tricking the son of the man he had betrayed flooded Remus's mind and he started to see red.

"What could you possibly say that would stop me from killing you right now for what you have done? How can you believe you deserve another chance?" he snapped, raising his shaking wand angrily.

"Moony, Wormtail is alive. It wasn't me. I wasn't the secret keeper, Peter was," answered Sirius.

His words were like sickening physical blows to Remus.

"LIAR!" he yelled. "*Incarcerus!*"

Ropes flew from his wand binding Sirius from chin to toe.

"No!" yelled Harry, throwing himself at the werewolf.

Remus stuck out instinctively, battering the slight boy aside. To his shock, Harry flew several feet into the air and slammed against a wall with a loud crash before slumping to the ground.

“Harry!” yelled Sirius, struggling desperately to free himself, but it was no use. “Harry! Remus, DON’T HURT HIM.”

Remus was shaking in anger and adrenaline overload.

“Why, Sirius? Are you planning on killing him too? What sick game are you playing, you filthy traitor?”

Sirius overbalanced and crashed to the floor, but kept trying to reach Harry, who had not moved after falling down.

“Harry,” he called again, ignoring Remus. “Harry!”

“STOP IT, SIRIUS!” yelled the werewolf, getting even angrier.

Seeing Sirius trying to wriggle over to the still form of Harry drove Remus wild. He stomped over and kicked the bound man in the side, hard.

“I SAID STOP IT!” he yelled, kicking the struggling man again and again as his anger took control.

“Expelliarmus!”

The forceful spell caught the werewolf unprepared and tossed him backwards to land painfully amongst the broken furniture, his wand flying out of his hand and his head crashing painfully against the floor.

Stars exploded in his sight as he struggled to raise his head. He felt unconsciousness descending and fought it, opening his eyes just long enough to catch a brief glimpse of Harry holding an old wand, before the darkness claimed him.

Ron and Hermione approached the famed castle slowly. They had Flooed to the nearby village of Hogsmeade to be able to walk the long path to the school together.

Once they had made their decision to return, the arrangements took a surprisingly short amount of time to complete. Both sets of parents had been pleased with the idea, for various reasons, and the Headmaster and his deputy were openly encouraging.

“Are you sure this is the right thing to do?” Ron asked, not for the first time.

“No, Ronald,” answered Hermione, with a frustrated sigh. “But it’s the best I can come up with.”

Ron nodded as they walked. He desperately wanted to reach out and take her hand in his, as he had done so many times over the past few weeks, but he suspected she might not be ready to flaunt their new relationship in front of former school friends.

It was going to be hard enough as it was; returning after absenting themselves for months – Ron for supposed mental problems and Hermione for grief over the loss of her two best friends. Adding another element for the gossip mill and rumour mongers to speculate on could possibly push either of them over the edge when the tales got back to them. He could just imagine how badly Hermione was going to be pestered as it was.

He knew Draco Malfoy and his goons were going to be a problem no matter what. They had discussed how best to deal with the blonde git, and had worked out a few strategies, but it was going to be difficult enough to not just hex the boy on sight, let alone when he invariably opened his mouth.

“You still haven’t explained how we are going to catch up on the classes,” he said.

While part of his therapy had involved structured education, and Hermione had been tutored as well as doing a ridiculous amount of self-study, they both knew there was a lot of work ahead to get to the same level as the others of their year. Missing out on the extra things

learned by interacting with their peers, and even the different homework assignments, meant a busy time was ahead for both, and Ron seriously doubted he was up to it.

“Trust me,” answered Hermione. “When we get to the castle we have to go see Professor McGonagall. She is going to a lot of trouble to help us out.”

Ron sighed loudly. He knew Hermione was keeping something from him, something she had put considerable effort into arranging.

Once upon a time, just a short year ago, he would have insisted she tell him, and probably would have gotten angry and sullen when she didn't, but now he accepted that he was just going to have to wait. It wasn't too hard, since he trusted her completely.

“It had better be good,” he laughed. “Anything that is going to get my grades up after missing half a year is going to have to be pretty impressive.”

Hermione smiled before reaching out to take his hand in her own, startling him slightly.

“Believe me,” she said. “You are going to like this.”

“Enervate!”

The reviving spell dragged Remus back from the restful place he had been in, and out into the light.

For a moment he was confused. A throbbing pain in the back of his head made it hard to think, and it took a few seconds for him to work out why he was unable to raise his hands to rub the sore spot on the back of his head where he could tell a lump the size of an egg was.

“Well, Remus,” said a voice. “That was not exactly the reunion I was hoping for.”

Blinking to clear his eyes Remus struggled against his bonds, trying to work out what was going on through the muddle of thoughts clouding his mind. With a rush, the memory returned.

“Sirius!” he spat, finally recognising the face in front of him. “Going to kill me too now? Oh that’s right, you didn’t have the guts to do it yourself, did you? What’s it going to be this time, going to make Harry do your dirty work?”

Pain flashed across the bruised face of his former friend, but Remus knew it was an act.

“I told you, Remus. I didn’t betray James and Lily, it was Wormtail-”

“Spare me the act, Sirius,” Remus snarled, knowing exactly how melodramatic it sounded, but needing to say the words anyway. “You may have convinced Harry that you are innocent, but you are never going to trick me.”

“He didn’t trick me,” said Harry, walking from behind Sirius to stand next to the kneeling man. He still held the old wand in his hand, and Sirius was holding Remus’s. “He saved me.”

Remus laughed bitterly.

“You think he took you to save you? What did you think they were going to do to you Harry? What did he tell you was going to happen?”

Remus noticed Sirius was starting to get angry, but Harry just laid a hand on his godfather’s shoulder, as if comforting the man.

“Sirius didn’t tell me anything – they put me into a cell next to him and told me he had betrayed my parents.”

For a moment, Remus didn’t understand. He knew Sirius had been put in the highest security cell, guarded night and day by Dementors. Harry was only a minor. Why would they have moved Sirius to the lighter security area?

“Well that explains how you escaped then, Sirius. Nobody could figure out how you pulled off that trick, but the Ministry didn’t telling anybody you had been moved.

Sirius’s next words struck the werewolf like a slap.

“They didn’t move me, Moony. They put Harry in next to me, Dementors and all.”

He couldn’t believe it; this had to be another trick.

“Liar,” he said. “You are just full of lies.”

Sirius tensed, as if he was going to strike out, but Harry’s hand on his shoulder kept him still.

“It’s true,” said Harry. “In my first week I was woken in the middle of the night and dragged from my low security cell on the surface. I don’t know who it was. After the Dementors had played with me for a bit, somebody cast a spell that made me blind, and then they roughed me up before taking me to ‘my new accommodation’ as they called it. I gathered from their comments that they thought low security was too good for me, although I don’t think they really cared what I had or had not done to Ginny.”

Remus noticed the boy gave an involuntary shudder as he spoke. It was a very good act.

“They carried me down and tossed me into a cell next to Sirius, not bothering to counter the blindness, and then spent ten minutes giving me a history of my new cell mates. Then the Dementors came back...”

Remus could hear the horror in the boy’s voice as he spoke. Sirius had turned away from Remus and was looking at the ground, as if he was ready to cry.

“Do you know what I heard when the Dementors came to me?” Harry asked. “I heard my mother and father’s voices – as Voldemort killed them.”

Remus knew his mouth was hanging open, but he could not help it.

“Later, I re-lived many other memories, but that first time, that was the worst, and do you want to know why? Because it is the only time I can remember ever hearing my parent’s voices.”

Sirius was sobbing; Remus could see tears falling from his face as he stared resolutely at the ground. Harry was speaking almost emotionlessly, as if he was merely telling somebody else’s tale, and not talking of his own humiliation and pain.

Remus wanted to rage, to scream and shout that it was Sirius’s fault Harry’s parents were dead, but the boy’s voice held him captive; kept him silent.

“Sirius talked to me then. He shouted my name and called out to me. I didn’t believe him when he said he was innocent either, at least not at first, but as the days dragged on, and the Dementors came more and more often to feed on my feelings, he was the only thing keeping me sane.”

“And do you know what he told me, what his secret was that had kept him from going completely mad like the rest of them?”

It was a rhetorical question, but Remus had to force himself not to shake his head wordlessly in answer.

“He told me it was the knowledge that he was innocent, just like I was. He taught me to hold onto that thought, showed me how to use it as a shield against the Dementors, since it was not a happy thought and they couldn’t take it from me. After that, I had to believe him, because it wasn’t possible for me to believe he was lying, not with that proof in front of me.”

Remus felt his mouth go dry as the first awareness of doubt started making itself known in his mind. He tried to shake it off.

“Harry,” he said calmly. “Whatever he told you, he lied. He is just trying to convince you-”

"I DID NOT LIE!" screamed Sirius, surging to his feet and pointing his wand at Remus.

"YOU CONFESSED! WHEN THEY ARRESTED YOU, YOU ADMITTED IT!" yelled Lupin in return.

"IT WAS MY FAULT!" screamed Sirius, then the anger seemed to disappear and a great sadness fell on him like a shroud, smothering his rage. "It was my fault. I made them change to Peter. It was my idea. I thought it was clever, that everyone would think I was the secret keeper and go after me, leaving Peter safe, but I was wrong. Peter was the traitor."

Sirius sat down heavily on the floor in front of Remus, his face awash with tears. "It's was my fault they died."

If it was not true, if they were playacting for him, it was the best act Remus had ever seen, but a decade of conviction was not easily overturned, and the werewolf was not somebody who trusted lightly, not anymore.

"Prove it," he said quietly.

Hogwarts was not the same.

At first Ron was sure it was because of the ordeal he had gone through. It seemed to him that everybody was somehow fearful, or on edge. Only the first years were acting 'normal', but even their exuberance was subdued in comparison to his first forage into the castle.

Everybody except the Slytherins, of course.

With Draco Malfoy leading the pack, the house of silver and green was dominating the school, bullying it with impudence. They strode the hallways as if they owned them, and everybody else was letting them get away with it – even the professors.

It was only after talking about it with Hermione that Ron realised the cause of the problem – the “Golden Trio” had been bested. He never before realised just how much Harry, Hermione, and himself, had discredited and undermined the Slytherins.

Harry's mere presence, along with his success in Quidditch, was a huge morale booster for the Gryffindors. They in turn encouraged the other two houses to stand up for themselves and showed the Slytherin belief in their own superiority was unfounded.

At the same time Hermione was top of almost every class, proving the lie in the prejudices of the purebloods, especially since she was not even a Ravenclaw.

Ron didn't really know what he added to the trio, but he suspected it was simply that he was nobody really special and had nothing notable going for him except his own purity of blood. His inclusion in the tight group showed others that Harry and Hermione were just normal people, without prejudices of blood.

With the trio basically evicted from the school, morale in every house except Slytherin suffered a mortal blow.

Even the house points were depressing. They were piled so high in Slytherin's favour that the other three houses together wouldn't equal it – just as it had been before their first year.

Returning to classes had been difficult for the two teenagers, especially for Ron, who found himself a long way behind his peers academically, but returning to the other familiar places, like the Gryffindor common room, had been a torture for them both.

It wasn't that people came out and asked where they had been and what they had been doing, that would have been acceptable, to a degree. Instead everybody seemed to be tiptoeing around them, as if scared they were going to lash out at the first person to say something out of place.

The couple were again sitting in the common room trying to catch up on the ridiculous amount of homework they had been lumbered with, but everytime Ron looked away from his work he caught a glimpse of somebody either looking away quickly, or whispering quietly while watching them. It was very distracting.

"This is ridiculous," he snarled.

For the last week since returning to school, he tried to be patient. His confidence and newfound insight had stood him in good stead as he blatantly ignored Malfoy and the other Slytherins' barbs without showing anything except contempt for them, but the lack of meaningful interaction with anybody from his own house, except his own brothers, was starting to get to him. Worse yet, he knew Hermione wasn't faring too well either, and he felt powerless to do anything about it.

It seemed his former housemates were so caught up in the gossip and stories that it never occurred to them to find out the truth for themselves.

"I have no idea how Harry ever got through his days with this sort of thing going on all the time," concluded Ron letting his anger rise.

Hermione looked at him with an expression that, even though he had seen it a few times since returning to her, still made his heart flutter.

He was sure it was pride.

"What?" he asked her.

She smiled brightly, making his heart flutter even more. "Nothing," she said. "Just ignore it, like we told Harry to do when everyone was saying he was the heir."

Ron leaned back in his chair and considered the situation. He remembered saying something like that to Harry when the whispering and comments had started, and it made him feel worse recalling it now.

How could he have offered such poor advice and support to his best friend in the whole world? He remembered having doubts about the raven haired boy himself, for no reason except that somebody had once told him all Parslemouths were evil.

Abruptly, he came to a decision.

"Nope. That's not going to cut it," he said, standing up. "Enough is enough."

Ignoring Hermione's suddenly panicked look, he waved his wand to move their homework aside, and climbed up to stand on the table where they had been working.

"Oi, you lot," he called loudly, interrupting several whispered conversations that started as soon as he began climbing onto the desk. "Listen up."

"I just want to set the record straight, since half of you nosy buggers can't seem to leave our business private, but haven't got the Gryffindor guts to come out and ask us-

"Yes, I did spend several months in a mental ward at St. Mungos, so what? I am not insane, befuddled, or suffering any kind of bleeding disorder. I was put there because I did not, and still do not, believe Harry Potter is guilty of anything except risking his life to try and save my sister."

More whispering broke out around him, but he hadn't finished yet.

"No, Hermione did not suffer a break down and have to leave school. She choose to leave and has been home-schooling herself because she couldn't stand to come back and face you lot on her own. Can you blame her? Look at how you are all treating her!"

"Imagine if you woke from being petrified just in time to see your friend put in jail, another one sent to a mental hospital, and a third stuck in a coma with nobody able to tell you why! I know I would not be here now if I didn't have her with me, and I've got brothers here to support me!"

"We returned, at her insistence mind you, because *she* felt it was the right thing to do. This does not mean she is going to run off the first time something happens. You know her, once she sets her mind on something, nothing will change it, so stop acting like sneaky, back-stabbing *Slytherins*, and start acting like friends."

Several quiet protests rumbled through the room, but quite a few people looked ashamed, especially Hermione's dorm mates.

"And finally, yes we are going out."

He caught a quick glimpse of Hermione as the sudden outbreak of whispers grew loud enough to interrupt him. She looked a bit embarrassed at the attention, but then raised her head up proudly to smile at him.

"Now, if any of you want to know something, ASK IT! We are not going to yell or curse you, unless you keep this whispering behind our backs going. Right?"

"Now, who's first?"

Everybody just stood around watching him, waiting for somebody else to be the first one. Nobody seemed to want to fill the void of silence the end of his impromptu speech had left.

"Anybody? Neville, you must want to know something. Come on, mate - ask away."

The normally shy and clumsy boy looked like he was going to make a break for it and run from the crowd now watching him, but after briefly catching Hermione's eye, he visibly screwed up his courage and straighten up.

"What did the healers really do to you?" he asked.

Ron almost laughed.

"They wasted a lot of time running tests and casting counter curses, trying to 'break' the spell Harry supposedly put on me. All the time they kept saying Harry must have been really powerful or used a really Dark spell to convince me he was innocent because they couldn't remove it. Even my oldest brother spent days trying every curse breaking trick he had, trying to get me 'free', but failed."

"Eventually they realised that was because there was no spell. After that, they just talked to me a lot, and made me talk to them a lot – a hell of a lot."

Neville was nodding to himself, as if Ron had confirmed something without meaning to. Several people even chuckled at his swearing.

"Did Harry really fight a Basilisk?" somebody Ron couldn't see asked.

"I didn't see it, but if Harry said he did, I believe him."

"Don't be stupid. How could a twelve year old fight a monster like that? It's ridiculous!" shouted an older boy Ron didn't know.

He resisted his impulse to jump off the table and pummel the git, and gave the same answer he had given the healers, his own family, and anybody else when they asked the same question.

"How could a one year old baby live after being hit with the killing curse? How could a baby defeat the most powerful evil wizard the world has ever seen?" snapped Ron. "This is *Harry Potter* we are talking about. Don't ever forget that."

Murmurs grew in volume in response to his statement, until another question was called out, one that caught Ron completely off guard.

He was pretty sure the voice belonged to either one of his other two roommates, or possibly one of his twin brothers. Either way, it instantly made him blush.

“So how far have you and Granger gone?”

Harry felt himself shaking slightly as he tried to hold his wand steady with just the tip touching the joined hands of Remus and Sirius.

They had explained the workings of unbreakable vows; how breaking the agreement would mean death for Sirius, and it terrified him to be part of such a dangerous spell, even if it was only as the magical witness: the bonder.

“Will you, Sirius Black, tell me only the truth about the night James and Lily were murdered?” ask Remus.

“To the best of my ability, I will,” agreed Sirius.

Even though he was expecting it, the surge of glowing magic that spilled from his wand and wound its way around their hands nearly made Harry yelp in surprise. He swallowed his cry and kept the tip steady.

“And will you tell me the truth about how and why you took Harry and escaped from prison?” asked Remus, his voice no longer quite as steady as it had been for the first question.

“I will,” answered Sirius strongly.

The second magical flame almost leaped from the wand to entwine itself with the first.

“And will you allow me to leave here, unharmed and in control of my own mind and memories?”

“I will, but only if your leaving does not directly endanger Harry’s life, freedom, or health,” said Sirius.

As the third stream of magic twisted its way around the other two only to fade into their clasped hands, Harry found himself holding his breath.

“Were you James and Lily’s secret keeper on the night they were murdered?” asked Remus, his voice cracking with suppressed emotion.

“No, Remus, my old friend, I was not, though I would give my very soul that I could go back and correct that mistake,” answered Sirius, far more calmly than Harry expected.

The revelation almost knocked Remus out again and he had to grab onto Sirius to stop from falling over. Sirius wasted no time and pulled the other man into a hug that was returned with equal vigour.

For hours afterwards they cried and laughed and forgave each other, although both knew they had hurt one another deeply, and the scars would take a long time to fade.

Harry often unexpectedly found tears running from his eyes, as he watched the two old friends renew their acquaintance. The depths of their broken friendship touched him deeply.

At times he felt he was intruding, so sat quietly away from the two men as they talked, envying them, but happy to just watch. He could well imagine Ron and himself one day becoming as close as the two men in front of him, and silently prayed to have the chance.

Remus talked about the hollow shell of a life he had lived since he had last seen Sirius, and Sirius teased him, and lamented the years they had lost.

When they noticed Harry, they invariably dragged him into the conversation, getting him to tell them his stories, few that they were, and in return shared tales of his parents.

A bright fire crackled quietly in the large fireplace, warming the interior of the cabin and casting ghostly shadows over the room. It had been infinitely easier to get it going with a wand, as was catching dinner. His great grandfather’s wand might not have been a perfect

match for Harry or Sirius, but it worked well enough for them to make good use of it.

As Harry felt himself start to slip away into sleep, he was suddenly aware of the two adults trying to have a silent argument.

"What's going on?" he asked, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"It's almost time," answered Sirius. "Remus is going to spend the night in the woods, and I am going to go with him."

"No you are not, Sirius," said Remus. "You are too weak. I could really hurt you, in your current state, and somebody has to stay here and make sure Harry is safe."

"Hey, I want to come too!" objected Harry, standing up quickly.

"No way, Tweety," said Sirius. "There is nothing you can do to a werewolf, and you would make a bite sized snack for this one. I need to go in case Remus stumbles across someone or something he shouldn't."

"Tweety?" asked Remus, smiling.

"Hey!" objected Sirius. "I couldn't think of anything better at the time, and it bugs him good."

Remus shook his head. "That's just not going to do at all, and neither is you risking your life just to watch over me--"

Suddenly he doubled over in pain.

Sirius grabbed him and shoved him out of the front door.

"Deadlock the door, stay inside, and don't come out for any reason," he yelled at Harry, as he struggled to get Remus outside before the transformation happened. "If it all goes Quaffle shaped, change and stay an animal until sun up. I'll see you back here in the morning."

Harry tried to object, but Sirius was already slamming the door behind him.

Briefly Harry considered opening it and joining them, but a terrifying scream of agony from Remus made him hesitate.

Instead, he bolted the door and crept over to the heavily shuttered window to peek out through gaps in the wood.

He watched, mortified, as Remus underwent the hideous transformation while Sirius spoke encouragement and comforting words - not changing into Padfoot until after Remus had completely become the wolf and howled at the moon.

For one split second, the enormous beast turned its baleful yellow eyes towards the cabin, and Harry had the unnerving feeling it could see him through the tiny gap.

Then Padfoot leapt between them and growled menacingly, forcing the wolf to forget about the cabin and pay attention to him instead.

A cold shiver of fear ran down Harry's spine. He jumped back from the window and transformed into his bird form before flying to take roost on one of the overhead beams near the warm chimney. He decided he was going to stay that way all night, just to be safe.

As he drifted off to sleep, he imagined he could hear the two canines' rough-housing out in the forest.

To his sleep fuddled imagination, it almost sounded like they were laughing.

Peter Pettigrew burrowed deeper into his hiding place and prayed it wasn't time for him to be administered tonic again.

For almost a dozen years the man had lived as a Rat, with only the briefest of breaks allowing him to retain any humanity at all. Until recently, he had degenerated to a point where it had been difficult to stay awake for more than a few hours per day, but at least he had been safe and well fed.

Now Sirius Black was loose, and there was no doubt in the traitor's mind that the man was hunting him. It made sleeping and eating almost impossible.

He hadn't meant to become a spy for the Dark Lord, but his capture all those years ago had broken him - the torture he had endured had turned him. He had done what he had to in order to survive, nothing more and nothing less, but once he had started down that path, there was no way back.

Knowing he had betrayed his friends, even before James and dear Lily had been killed, meant he knew he would never be able to return to them and confess his crimes. One hint of his disloyalty would have meant death, or worse, Azkaban.

If only James had stuck to the plan and made Sirius the secret keeper, then Peter would never have been able to betray them to their deaths. Sirius was more than a match for the Dark Lord's best, so Peter would not have been endangering his friends by reporting the Potters going into hiding.

Peter was not overly cunning, or strong. The only time he had even felt worthy was when his friends had included him in their lives, but that wasn't enough for him to resist Voldemort's promises of power and threats of pain.

Often he had been dragged to the Dark Lord's side by the agonising burn of his mark. Once there he could keep nothing secret from the beast. Not that he had any desire to, not after his extensive torture had taught him devotion to his new leader.

It had been both a blessing and a curse when Voldemort fell to his own curse. On one hand, Peter was free, but on the other, he now had nowhere to go and was surely soon to be hunted.

Framing Sirius had been the only chance Peter had of escaping to live another day in freedom, and it had worked. It meant he had spent over a decade as pet, but the alternative was worse, much worse.

Closing his eyes for what felt like the first time in weeks, Wormtail once again tried to forget the image of a vengeful Sirius Black in Grim

form stalking him like the spectre of death his Animagus form embodied

He was only partially successful, as usual.

“Tell me, Mr. Dumbledore,” said Malfoy, strutting in front of the audience and judges alike. “Is it true that you witnessed Harry Potter fatally attacking Professor Quirell, his first Defence Against the Dark Arts Teacher?”

Harry saw Dumbledore stiffen in response. The oath Malfoy had insisted the Headmaster take meant he had to tell the truth, and the truth was Harry had killed Quirell.

“No,” answered the Headmaster calmly. “Professor Quirell died when the spirit co-inhabiting his body was forced to leave it.”

Despite his drug muddled condition, Harry resisted the temptation to let out a huge sigh.

Malfoy looked thoughtful for a moment before asking the next question.

“And was this ‘evil spirit’ ejected from Professor Quirell’s body because the professor had just sustained massive injuries? Injuries inflicted by Harry Potter, no less?”

Dumbledore frowned slightly, but Harry could tell he had to say it.

“Harry Potter had just defended himself against an attack by Professor Quirell, yes.”

More noise erupted from the gallery, but Malfoy raised his voice to be heard over them.

“And didn’t this ‘defence’ consist of magic identical to that used on young Miss Weasley? The same magic that has apparently put her into a coma that our best healers are unable to wake her from?”

The Headmaster was silent, but Harry knew that was answer enough for the majority of witches and wizards.

“And is it not also true that you did not in fact punish Mr. Potter, but awarded him house points for actions that ultimately resulted in the death of professor Quirell?”

The gallery grew louder, but Malfoy hadn’t finished yet, raising his voice over the rising noise.

“And are you not also the person directly responsible for placing the infant Mr. Potter in the care of those filthy Muggles, and that you subsequently forced him to return to them after the incident with professor Quirell, specifically so the very same magic that had already been used so effectively would retain its potency?”

The noise from the gallery ran out of control as even the head of the court seemed stunned by these revelations.

Harry couldn’t stop his head from drooping as his greatest hope of being set free was decimated right before his eyes.

And it was all true.

Harry woke to morning sunlight streaming in through the unshuttered windows of the bedroom. The infrequent nightmare-memories of his trial barely bothered him, compared to the Dementor induced recollections, but they were still vivid enough to disturb his slumber.

He considered rolling over and going back to sleep on the comfortable mattress, but a delicious smell was wafting into the room, as it had done almost every morning since Remus had joined them in the cabin.

With magic at their disposal, they were no longer living a hard life. Sharing his great grandfather’s wand between them was actually become fun. Finding things to do, as an excuse to have another turn with it, became a bit of a game between Sirius and Harry.

After a dozen years of not performing magic, Sirius wasted no time in getting back into the swing of it. Much of their time was taken up with

Sirius teaching Harry every useful spell he could remember. The instruction was a bit spotty in consistency and topic, but they both enjoyed it immensely.

To Harry, his godfather looked several years younger the moment he held a wand in his hand.

As if summoned by Harry's thought's, Sirius stepped in through the doorway.

"You awake, kiddo?" he asked.

"If I say no, will you believe me?" asked Harry, grinning.

Sirius laughed and turned to leave the room. "Well make sure you wake up before Remus eats all the crispy bits of bacon again".

"Hey!" came a shout from the other room. "That wasn't me the first time!"

Harry laughed, but instead of getting up, he closed his eyes and reached for the crushing void of apparition.

With a loud crack, he was suddenly sitting in his usual spot at the breakfast table cross from a startled Remus, and reaching for the loaded plate of bacon, causing Sirius to shout and bolt for the table before Harry took all the best bits.

One of the first things the two men had taught Harry was to Apparate. It too many long, painful, and tiring, hours of practice, with lots of splinchings, but he made good progress in mastering the discipline and loved to jump around at any opportunity he got.

Their reasoning was that it would, give him an avenue for escape that his pursuers would not expect, but Harry just loved the magic.

"You had time to get changed first, Harry," said Sirius taking his seat at the table. "Remus has already eaten half a pig while he was supposed to be cooking, so I would have saved you some."

Harry nodded his thanks and reached for his shared wand. A few quick flicks of a switching spell later, and he was dressed in his new muggle clothes.

Remus supplied them with everything, offering to pay for it from his own account, and planning on taking pains to not be seen buying large quantities of food or inappropriate clothes, like child sized robes.

Instead, Sirius insisted on withdrawing money from his account to fund the werewolf, who did not really have the means to easily cover such expenditure, and Harry had the insight to suggest buying what they needed from large Muggle shops where such purchases would go unnoticed amongst the multitudes.

Getting money from Gringotts when you were a fugitive turned out to be ridiculously easy, involving only needing a signed letter to be owed to the bank to authorise payments and transfers. The goblins refused to allow the Ministry access to their records, so confidentiality was assured.

Neither Harry nor Sirius left the general vicinity of the cabin, despite Harry's new found love of Apparating, but they spent the weeks 'living it up' in relative safety, with fine foods, strong medicines, and great company.

It was easily one of the best times of Harry's life.

This morning, Harry couldn't help noticing Remus seemed a bit distracted and didn't fully participate in what had become a morning ritual of playful joking and teasing.

Harry wasn't sure Sirius noticed, so had a frustrating silent conversation with him involving pointed looks and slight head movements.

"So are you going to tell us what's on your mind, Moony?" Sirius finally asked, while Harry levitated the dishes off the table and into the small sink. He would later clean most of them using magic too, and not just for practice.

Remus let out a huge sigh and lent back in his chair. "That obvious is it?"

"Might as well have written 'something is bothering me' in glow-worm-green ink on your forehead, old boy," said Sirius, ignoring the fact it was Harry who noticed the werewolf had something on his mind.

Remus reached into an inside pocket of his jacket and took out a large envelope.

Harry instantly recognised the brief glimpse of flowing writing on the front and wax seal on the back from a letter he had received that had changed his life – it was from Dumbledore.

"I have been asked to take over the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts," explained Remus. "It seems the former professor up and decided to leave with virtually no notice, and Dumbledore is desperate for somebody."

"Who was the teacher?" asked Harry, not neglecting to swallow the mouthful of breakfast before speaking. Two years of sharing a table with Ron made him well aware of proper eating etiquette, and it really was excellent bacon.

"It was still Gilderoy Lockhart," answered Remus darkly. "It appears he broke that old 'one year curse' thing on the defence position, or so he is claiming."

"That's probably because, technically, he wasn't actually teaching anything," grumbled Harry, "except how to be fully paid up member of his fan club."

Sirius frowned - the worry lines on his still gaunt face making him look much older. "I didn't think they would allow a werewolf to teach children."

"Why not?" asked Harry, a bit shocked at Sirius's tone.

"Because werewolves like me are considered Dark creatures, Harry; a danger to everyone. Some people think we might go insane at any

second and attack innocent bystanders,” answered Remus, sounding more than slightly bitter at his words.

“That’s just silly,” said Harry.

In the short time knew Remus, he came to really like his father’s old companion. The long hours the three of them spent together forged a close friendship between them, especially when the two adults often seemed to forget Harry was not James, and that they were no longer teenagers themselves.

Remus was always a bit more reserved and restrained, than Sirius, but he seemed to have taken to Harry quickly and easily, making the boy feel like a friend, rather than just a child.

Harry was not the most observant of people, but even he could tell that the werewolf had been very lonely for a long time and often seemed surprised at the way both Sirius and Harry treated him.

“It is silly,” agreed Remus. “Nevertheless, Dumbledore has made it clear that, should I take the position, my ‘condition’ will not be widely advertised.”

“What do you mean ‘should you take the position’?” asked Sirius. “You are going to, aren’t you? It’s a fantastic opportunity. You’ll make a great professor, Moony.”

“Yeah,” agreed Harry. “Look at how much you have taught me!”

While Sirius’s teaching was fairly random and spontaneous, Remus spent time each night with Harry, helping him with anything he had trouble with during the day, explaining much that been mysterious or confusing when Sirius ‘taught’ him. Lupin was a natural teacher; patient, intelligent, and understanding.

Sirius liked to concentrate on practical spells that they could use while on the run, but Remus enjoyed discussing the theory behind each and every spell and how magic worked.

“Not to forget how much mischief you can get up to as one of the professors,” encouraged Sirius, grinning. “Think of not having to worry about getting caught roaming the corridors after hours...”

“And being able to take points away from Slytherin’s just for existing,” added Harry.

“You could make Snape’s life hell,” said Sirius, starting to get excited at the prospect. “Think of all the pranks you could do to him.”

“And his brainless sycophants,” added Harry.

Remus squirmed in his seat, as if finding it suddenly uncomfortable.

Harry saw Sirius’s expression flash to confusion first, then to realisation. “Don’t tell me you are worried about us?”

The argument that ensued, as Sirius tried to convince the werewolf to take up the generous offer and Remus kept coming up with reason’s not to go, bordered on turning nasty several times, and degenerated in ridiculousness quite often.

Harry hated the idea of Remus leaving them, but he thought he understood Sirius’s reasoning. Remus did not come straight out and said it, but Harry guessed, from things that he didn’t say as much as from what he did, that the man’s life after Sirius was jailed had been extraordinarily hard.

The werewolf lived almost as a tramp, not caring where his feet took him as he wandered from one magical community to the next. He even spent time as a Muggle, but missed magic too much to stay away for long.

Remus explained he was worried Sirius and Harry would go ‘looking for trouble’ and end up getting caught and returned to Azkaban, or worse. He pointed out that Sirius was never been the most responsible of people to begin with, and was even more likely to be reckless now.

There was also the fact that the werewolf was also almost as determined as Sirius to hunt down Wormtail and bringing him to

justice, although he argued in favour of delivering the rat alive to the Ministry in order to clear Sirius's name. Harry was certain that it was only his own presence that stopped both men from immediately heading off in search of the Weasley's pet.

"Maybe Peter has returned to Hogwarts, with the Percy," Harry said, stopping the argument that had been going around in circles and growing louder for quite some time. "I know you said he would not go anywhere near St Mungos, but maybe Ron gave him back to Percy, or Peter found a way to sneak back on his own. I mean, he must have a reason for staying with them for so long..."

Both of the older men stared at him wordlessly for so long that he started to feel uncomfortable.

"Just a thought," he said, feeling a blush rising.

"A very good one, Harry," said Remus. "A very good one indeed."

"Well that settles it then," said Sirius. "You are going to take the job and go to Hogwarts, Moony."

"And me and Harry are going to come with you to go rat hunting."

The argument got much more exciting after that.

"Severus," began the Headmaster, sounding slightly impatient. "I understand your concerns, but this matter is not up for discussion. You barely have enough time to take care of your own classes without attempting to take on the Defence position as well."

"Headmaster, I am more than qualified and capable of holding both positions-"

"Not with the amount of time you have been spending in the Chamber," interrupted Dumbledore.

"-and you can't be seriously considering to allow that *creature* into the school, not with his best friend still on the loose and no doubt holding the Potter brat captive."

Dumbledore abruptly stood up from behind his desk and walked over to where his familiar perched on its elaborate gold stand. The phoenix crooned quietly as the Headmaster gently stroked the brightly feathered head softly.

“It is imperative you continue to examine the Chamber, Severus. I cannot impress upon you enough the importance of discovering what you can of Voldemort’s activities in there.”

“Surely you can’t still be hoping to find something to exonerate Potter?” snarled Snape.

Dumbledore stopped and turned to look directly into the Potions professor’s eyes, and Snape felt himself involuntarily wither under the hard glare.

“I trust you are finding the carcass of the Basilisk to be recoverable?” Dumbledore said, after a moment.

Snape felt himself involuntarily blanch. Not only had there indeed being a dead Basilisk, just as Potter had claimed, but it had been considerably larger than the boy had indicated – at least sixty feet from tip to tail.

Cutting it up and bottling all of the various pieces was taking an immense amount of time and effort, and not just because every inch of the enormous beast was toxic to touch.

That Potter, as a twelve year old child, had killed the monster with nothing more than a sword, an old hat, and a phoenix to help him, directly and completely contradicted the vindictive professor’s numerous assertions that there was nothing special about the boy.

Dumbledore was using that now; rubbing Snape’s face in the fact that he was undeniably wrong about Harry Potter, and so was his unjustifiable attitude.

“Headmaster,” said Snape, returning his tone to the almost condescending one that was his norm. “I believe you should be more concerned with defending yourself from this recent spate of political

manoeuvrings that seem to be aimed at once again removing you from the school, this time permanently.”

Dumbledore returned his attention to his familiar.

“Once the truth of Mr. Potter’s innocence is made public, any such attempt will flounder,” he said.

“Surely you can’t expect to uncover a link between the chamber and Lucius Malfoy,” insisted Snape. “You do realise he is the real power behind Lockhart’s sudden rise in the political arena, do you not? If it becomes common knowledge that you have allowed a werewolf to enter the school-”

Dumbledore sighed, cutting off Snape’s rant with an upheld hand.

“All I know is that an innocent boy was wrongly sent to prison. The attacks upon my reputation and leadership of this school were successfully used to distract us from what should have had our full attention. I will not again allow fear of reprisals to condemn another,” explained Dumbledore patiently. “Remus Lupin will take over the Defence position because he is the most qualified candidate I can find on short notice who also holds my complete trust, and I will not abandon that decision because of unfounded prejudices against him. You will continue to investigate the Chamber looking for anything to help us discover how this tragedy has come about.”

“Very well, Headmaster,” Snape said, taking hint from the subtle rebuke and standing up. “But I still believe allowing Black’s former accomplice into the school is a mistake, and I dearly hope you do not ignore my warning, and end up regretting it.”

With a swirl of his robes, Snape left the office.

“As do I, Severus,” whispered the ancient man to himself as the door closed, clanging loudly behind his departing professor, “as do I.”

A loud crack sounded behind the Headmaster, startling him out of his thoughts.

Moving with a speed not expected of somebody only a third of his age, Dumbledore spun around to face the sound, a glowing wand appearing in his hand seemingly from out of thin air.

For a second there was stunned silence in the room as the Headmaster regarded the newcomer.

“How may I help you, little elf?” he finally asked in a gentle tone as he lowered his wand slightly.

“Please, sir,” stammered the dishevelled elf. “My name is Dobby, sir, and I be needing to tell youse something very important sir.”

For an inexplicable reason, Dumbledore felt a smile creep into his face.

“It is the decision of the full court that the defendant, Mr. Harry James Potter, is guilty of all charges and is hereby sentenced to serve in the rehabilitation wing of Azkaban until such a time as he is no longer considered a threat to our society.”

The roar of the audience drowned out the Minister for Magic as he continued to pronounce the sentence, but the only thing filling Harry’s still befuddled mind was a mortifying feeling of horror as a side door opened and two wraith-like, cloaked figures glided into the room. He watched, with mounting terror, as the creatures moved silently towards him, closing the distance far too smoothly for any natural animal.

As an icy chill descended on him, the feeling of fear penetrated the magically induced dullness he had been experiencing, releasing him to full consciousness for the first time since his arrest.

He wanted to scream, to lash out at the monstrosities that were approaching him, but fear gripped him in its unrelenting hold, smothering his will with its overwhelming power.

In desperation, he mustered his will and managed to turn his head away from the creatures, searching in vain for a saviour.

The last thing he saw, before blackness closed in on him and a distant screaming filled his senses, was Hermione weeping uncontrollably as she stretched her hands out to him, trying in vain to reach him across the length of the room while people held her back.

The sleek falcon swooped through the trees, twisting and turning with an agility that made even his famous Nimbus 2000 broom seem like a lumbering behemoth.

Underneath him, running along the forest floor at a breakneck pace, Padfoot tried to keep up.

Harry could feel his airways constricting against the pressure of the speeding air, his wings moving the merest fraction of an inch to guide him as he suddenly plummeted towards his prey.

The sheer speed was exhilarating beyond belief.

It helped him forget - helped him climb out of the pit of depression the morbid memories of his short time in Azkaban constantly sunk him into. It helped stop the flashbacks that still occasionally woke him in the middle of the night, clutching at his blankets in fear.

He knew Sirius felt the same way, although his godfather had years of misery to try and get over. The cries as the older man was torn from his sleep often woke Harry too, but neither of them ever mentioned anything about them to each other.

Sometimes, Harry caught Sirius staring off into space. Occasionally he didn't seem to recognise Harry, or Remus, for that matter, but he would just shake his head and laugh, saying he was just getting old and forgetful. Harry knew Sirius had a long way to go in his recovery, and he was determined to do everything he could to help.

Inches from disaster, Harry flared his wings to cut his speed down to almost nothing, and deftly plucked a hair from the tail of the huge Grimm, causing it to yelp at the sudden, unexpected pain.

"Cheeky bugger," said Sirius, when they had returned to the cabin. "One day Padfoot's going to snatch you out of the air and use you for

a chew toy for a while before burying you up to that feather neck of yours.”

Harry laughed.

Their daily run was more than just exercise for both of them. Neither enjoyed staying in the confines of the cabin for too long. Remus even encouraged them, telling them to get out and about while they still could, since the amount of time they would be able to spend outside once back at Hogwarts might be limited, to avoid attracting too much attention.

“Yep, one day I am going to catch you on a low branch,” threatened the older man. “Then Padfoot is going to pluck you good.”

Harry laughed again. He loved it when Sirius was not acting his age. Glimpses of the mischievous, fun-loving man he should have been, had he not been sent to prison, were becoming more and more frequent now, especially since Remus had joined them.

“If you did, would I be bald when I returned to human shape?” Harry asked, genuinely interested, and not a little afraid.

Sirius grinned evilly. “I don’t know, but it is going to be fun finding out.”

Any attempt to get more of an explanation was interrupted by Remus returning from what they hoped would be the last shopping trip before leaving for Hogwarts.

Harry insisted on making lunch while the other two put away the groceries - it was mostly long-lasting packages of food. The idea was to make sure the cabin was well stocked in case they needed to use it again.

“Well, Harry,” said Remus, as he stuffed the last tin onto a shelf and cast a preservation charm on it. “Are you looking forward to going back to school?”

“Sure. It’s not exactly like I am going to be going to classes or doing homework,” said Harry.

He looked up from his cooking just in time to catch the two men exchanging a very curious look.

“What?” he asked, instantly suspicious of the unspoken comment.

“Don’t be too sure about that,” said Sirius. “We were talking, and although you obviously won’t be able to sit in with your friends, we think it would be a good idea for you to spend some time learning more than the common bits of magic we have been showing you around here.”

Seeing Harry’s dumfounded look, Remus spoke up.

“Harry, both you and Padfoot can spend a lot of time with me, as my familiars, but you need to think about the future. If you are going to survive, you need to know at least as much as an ordinary wizard, and Hogwarts is probably the safest place you could be.”

“That’s what Wormtail thinks,” said Harry darkly. “But we are still going to be looking for him, aren’t we?” he asked Sirius.

Sirius nodded. “For sure, but that still leaves a lot of hours for the two of us to teach you things you are going to need to know. Remus will be able to get your school books, and we’ll tutor you as much as we can, but you can still pick up a lot from classes.”

“But what if we are seen?” asked Harry. “We can’t exactly train while in animal form, and I doubt if Dumbledore would fail to notice the two of us wandering around the castle...”

“Hogwarts is very large, Harry,” said Remus. “And there are a lot of empty rooms. I’ve requested some ‘special’ quarters, due to my condition. None of the other staff or students will enter my private rooms, not even the Headmaster, so you should be safe enough there most of the time. There is also an old run-down house near the village that is still abandoned. I used to spend my ‘furry’ time inside of it, so it is pretty banged up, but it is liveable, and very secluded. Nobody would even think to look for you in there.”

“Why not?” Harry asked, spitting his attention between the conversation and the meal preparation.

“Well, because it has the reputation of being the most haunted place in Britain, thanks to my monthly visits, and numerous pranks played by the Marauders.” Remus shared a brief smile with Sirius. “But there is one other thing that we’d like to try.”

“Harry, do you know how owls find somebody to deliver a letter to?” asked Sirius.

Harry shook his head and began to serve the quick lunch. “They just know, don’t they?”

He knew his owl, Hedwig, was very smart, even to the point of sometimes knowing beforehand when he or someone else wanted her to take a message, but he had never really thought about it before.

Remus shook his head in answer. “Each owl has a special spell cast on it before it is sold. The spell is quite complicated, but lasts the lifetime of the bird, normally.”

“Normally?” asked Harry, taking a huge bite. One of the few things he gained from the Dursleys was the ability to prepare a limited selection of food – Vernon did not have an extensive palette and frowned on anything ‘foreign’.

“Yes, normally, but, from what I have been able to find out, when it is cast on an Animagus, it only lasts a few weeks at best.”

Harry almost spat his food out as realisation of what Remus was proposing sunk in, but ended up inhaling it instead.

Coughing violently while Sirius laughingly pounded him not-so-helpfully on the back, it took a few minutes before he could express his outrage.

“You want to make me into a *mail owl*?”

“Well not technically an owl, since you are obviously not an owl, but some kind of falcon...” argued Sirius.

“Could be a peregrine, I think,” added Remus, ignoring Harry’s outraged look.

“You think? I thought they were bigger,” said Sirius.

“There are a few different types.”

“I didn’t know that, although I did say he was a falcon, didn’t I Harry?”

“HOLD ON!” yelled Harry, trying to derail the now familiar banter of the two old friends. “Let me get this straight. You want to cast a spell on me that will let me find people to deliver letters to, like an owl?”

“It will give me an excuse to have two familiars with me, and quite frankly, I can’t see Padfoot being much good at deliveries,” explained Remus. “He keeps getting distracted and stops to clean himself far too regularly, if you ask me.”

“You’re just jealous because you can’t get away with it more than once a month,” retorted Sirius.

“True, but I don’t seem to get the same level of satisfaction out of it you do-”

“Will it let me find Wormtail?” interrupted Harry.

Both men stopped to look at him, surprised at his sudden change in direction.

“No, sorry. If he is in his rat form, which he most likely is, you won’t be able to find him, it doesn’t work that way,” answered Remus.

Harry sighed.

“What’s the matter, kiddo?” asked Sirius, with a concerned look. “It’s not that bad.”

“I know,” said Harry, letting out an exaggerated, dramatic sigh. “It’s just, ever since I found out about magic, I always figured there were loads of interesting jobs I could do, like dragon tamer, or spell

inventor, or maybe even play Quidditch professionally, but I never thought I'd end up as a mailman."

"Mail-bird, Harry," said Sirius, resting a hand on Harry's shoulder in mock comfort. "Not mailman, Mail-bird."

"Well at least I'll have a purpose," retorted Harry.

"You say that like it is a good thing," responded Sirius, with a disappointed shake of his head.

"Welcome to your new home in Azkaban, Mr. Potter," snarled the scar-faced Warden as he opened the squeaking metal door to Harry's cell.

It wasn't a large room, but it was a considerably bigger than the cupboard where he had slept every night that he could remember before receiving his Hogwarts letter. It was even a little larger than Ron's room in the top floor of the Burrow, although it lacked any of the homeliness that made Ron's such a fine place.

Grey stone walls stood on all sides unbroken except for a small window high up on the far wall that was letting in the morning light, and the door where he was currently standing.

The ceiling may have once been painted white, but had now faded to a slightly lighter shade of the same grey that seemed to penetrate everything. Even the floor had turned the same dull shade, masking the pattern of the flagstones with a grey sheen.

It was as if the grey was an insidious fungus slowly creeping over everything to consume all other colours with its unstoppable dullness. For a moment Harry wondered if he too would end up that same grey colour.

An embarrassingly open toilet and basin took up one corner of the room, in open view of the grill in the door, but Harry knew shame was going to be the least of his worries during his incarceration.

The plain but sturdy metal frame bed looked considerably better than Dudley's old broken one, the mattress definitely having more life to it, little that it was.

The rest of the sparse furniture also looked to be in better condition than what he had endured under the tender care of his 'family'. The writing desk and doorless wardrobe both looked like they were growing out of the wall rather than being free standing items. Both were made of the same stone, and both looked like they could not be moved, ever.

The overall effect was thoroughly depressing, but not as bad as he expected.

“This is your new home. You’ll get let out for two hours everyday to exercise in the yard, and three hours for mandatory work detail. Your rehabilitation officer will see you twice a month. You are allowed a total of three books from the library in your room at any one time. There are lots of other rules, but for now, stow your gear and I’ll take you to the mess hall where you will eat all of your meals.”

“You will not be enjoying you stay here, but it could be a lot worse – You could be on the level where the Dementors deliver your meals...”

Flying while dizzy is not something Harry would ever recommend to anybody, especially when the flying doesn’t involve a broom. Quite frankly, he would have rather been walking, and that was saying something.

Remus and Sirius cast the locating spell on him several times over the last few hours, but each previous time he found himself too disorientated to even take off.

This last attempt was much better, but it was still not good enough, despite Lupin’s encouragement.

“We just need a bit more practice,” Remus had explained. “It’s not like I have ever done this before.”

Unsurprisingly, this did not make Harry feel that much more confident, and he dreaded ever having to actually deliver anything further than a few miles away while he was so dizzy he could barely fly straight.

Following the vague feeling that lodged itself in the back of his mind, Harry flew around a dense clump of tress and headed for the ground. As he neared the spot his new sense was pointing him towards, he made out Sirius standing in the shade of one of the large trees, watching him approach. The spell didn’t work at all if Sirius was in dog form.

Harry spread his wings to cut his speed, reached out his impressive claws to latch onto Sirius’s padded arm, and promptly missed

completely, crashing into the older man's chest with a solid thump, knocking him to the ground.

Returning to his human form, Harry closed his eyes and lay on his back on the ground, waiting for the trees and sky above him to stop spinning.

"And that, Harry," laughed a winded Sirius, regaining his feet while rubbing his chest, "is why I have never let you near my bottle. If you can't handle a bit of spell dizziness, you would die from the hangover that stuff will give you."

Harry groaned.

The spell tended to fade quickly once he was human, but not quickly enough for his liking.

"This is never going to work," he moaned, while still clutching the grass firmly to make sure he wasn't tossed from the revolving earth. He felt childish as tears welled in his closed eyes and threatened to burst free from any control.

"Course it is," said Sirius. "We just –"

"- need to practice some more, I know. I know," interrupted Harry. "I just wish this practice didn't involve making me feel like I've been taking a ride in Petunia's tumble dryer. Can't you just take me along as another pet? Surely not every bird in the wizarding world can deliver mail?"

Harry opened his eyes, as the spinning slowed down, and stared up into the grinning face of his godfather.

"Probably not, but do you want to take the chance Snivellus or Dumbledore guess what's really going on?" ask Sirius, allowing some bitterness to enter his voice at the mention of the headmaster and his lapdog.

While Harry was disappointed at Dumbledore's inability to protect him, Sirius had been nothing short of betrayed, and felt appropriately enraged. The many failures of the so called greatest wizard alive

infuriated his once loyal follower, especially when the net result was at least two innocent people going to Azkaban.

Sirius would likely never trust the headmaster again, and Harry wasn't too far behind him in that assessment, despite Remus's half-hearted excuses of the reported pressures and political machinations that had been brought to bear during the trial.

"It's unusual enough for a werewolf to have a single pet, let alone two," continued Sirius. "We're just lucky Remus is not a typical werewolf to begin with, and so can excuse my existence as another part of him just trying to be an everyday wizard."

"Now, you ready to go back yet?" asked the older fugitive.

"To Remus, or Hogwarts?" asked Harry.

"Either. Both. Take your choice," Sirius shrugged.

"Hogwarts – yes. I know it is going to be hard, but I really loved it there. It felt like home, a real home," answered Harry, after a moments thought.

Sirius sighed.

"I know, pup. It felt that way to me too – Remus even more so. We all have some very fond memories of that old castle - cold floors, ghosts, detention happy professors, poltergeists, and all. Come on. Change back and I'll cast the spell again. Let's get this over with this as quickly as possible, eh?" encouraged Sirius. "I know it's hard, mate."

"I really preferred learning other stuff, you know?" Harry replied. "Even the cleaning spells were better than this. Definitely more fun."

Sirius's face turned an ugly mixture of disgust and concern.

"Harry, as your godfather, I think it is important that I start explaining some fundamental facts of life to you. Men NEVER admit to enjoying cleaning up, all right? Now change back and be a good delivery bird before I show you another hex. This one causes you ears to seal shut and your eyes to turn back inside your head!"

"Cool!" laughed Harry enthusiastically "Sounds like fun. Can we try it on Moony if he complains about the fur or feathers on the couch again?"

"Not likely. He's too good at reflecting it back, so you'll be the one getting a tour of the inside of your skull, but if you master this today, I'll teach you the sobering spell tonight - Very handy for fixing nasty hang-overs."

"So you think it will help me with the dizziness then?" asked Harry hopefully.

Sirius rubbed his stubbled chin thoughtfully. "Maybe, but I was thinking more along the lines of you using it on me, once Remus feels up to splitting that last bottle."

"Now change," he said, raising his wand threateningly.

Harry groaned before closing his eyes and transforming. The unsettling feeling of the spell encompassed him almost immediately as Sirius spoke the words, and a sudden need to find Remus Lupin settled into a distant corner of his mind.

Surprisingly, he wasn't as dizzy this time.

Even after multiple visits, Severus still felt like he should be bowing before the towering statue of Salazar Slytherin that dominated the Chamber of Secrets.

Secrets, Severus thought sarcastically to himself. *Not secret, secrets. So why is it that I cannot find any?*

The door had been challenging enough, but trying to uncover what else the magical room harboured was proving vastly more difficult.

The Headmaster himself had journeyed down to look around, but stayed only a short while, fearing his mere presence may upset any magical traces left behind by Tom Riddle.

Not that anything Severus could find made any sense anyway.

Overlaying the faint magical traces of the former Head boy, Potter and the Weasley girl's magic was the equivalent of a herd of Hippogriffs trampling an ancient game trail.

It didn't help that Severus was far more interested in delving even further back into the past of the chamber; back to real purpose Slytherin had created it. He suspected Riddle may have uncovered a great store of information, of lost, ancient knowledge and insight, but while the mystery of how Tom supposedly managed to put a thinking memory into a book remained, Severus would get no peace from Dumbledore.

"At least he let me keep the Basilisk," mumbled the disgruntled potions professor, as he prepared yet another series of truth-seeking and view-the-past spells. Hopefully one of these would give him some idea of the magic used by Riddle on what may have been one of his first major steps towards becoming Voldemort - if the Headmaster was to be believed.

Despite discovering the corpse of the great beast, just as Potter had said it would be, Severus still did not fully believe the spoilt fool's tale.

Not so spoilt though, was he? a voice deep in Severus's mind asked wordlessly.

Severus snorted at the random thought.

All right, maybe life with those pathetic Muggles may not have been exactly how he had envisioned it, but surely the degree of neglect supposedly exposed at the trial was exaggerated. As if the brat had truly experienced a hard upbringing. Let him walk a mile in Severus's own childhood shoes; that would teach some much needed humility.

But you were never locked in a cupboard without food for days, and your mother did often show you she loved you, said the annoying inner voice. *Even your father wasn't always all bad. Potter had none of that.*

Severus growled.

It was impossible for everything that came out about Potter's home life before Hogwarts to be true. If his life really had been that bad, he would be a completely different person to the boy who had been arrogantly flaunting all the rules and running amok for the last two years.

Or maybe he is different, and you have refused to see it.

Severus almost stumbled as that thought sunk in. Had he been blind? Was his hatred of James Potter so powerful that it had warped his perception of the man's son?

Isn't that what the others have been saying for years now?

Shaking off the unwelcome thoughts, Severus returned to his task and refused to think about anything other than the ritual he was about to perform. Potter was an arrogant, pathetic, spoilt brat who got what he deserved, and nothing would change Severus's mind about that.

He drew the obscure runes, and then carefully recited the almost forgotten incantation from the thick tome, while prescribing complex wand patterns in the air.

As his wand flowed through the design, leaving fiery glowing lines where it passed, Severus saw the ancient magic lock onto the trace he was seeking, but the trail was not one from over four decades ago, it was one much, much more recent.

And it led out the door and down the tunnel, heading towards the school.

The intense cold woke him.

He had only been in his cell a few days and was not yet accustomed to it, but the sudden biting cold was completely different from anything he had experienced in the prison so far.

As always, the moment his mind became aware, he recalled where he was, and why.

Ginny was in hospital, her recovery an almost non-existent hope, Ron was locked away getting brainwashed, and it was all Harry's fault.

If he had fought harder, if he had destroyed Riddle sooner, if he had not ran off to try and rescue Ginny, but had gone to a real teacher instead – things would have been different.

At least Hermione was no longer petrified, although the state he had last seen her in, just before he was dragged from the courtroom, was almost worse.

The memory of the Dementors carrying him from the raging mob the audience became made him shiver more. He pulled the blanket closer around him and rolled over to try and go back to sleep, banishing the memories to the back of his mind where they belonged, but the cold seemed to be getting worse.

As an unwelcome feeling began to tug at him, Harry suddenly realised he recognised the chill – it was Dementors, and he knew, without knowing why, that they were coming for him.

Harry squawked loudly as a sudden rough bump knocked him off his perch and into the bars of the cage. He spent most of the journey in a magically induced snooze, but the abrupt movement now startled him into full wakefulness.

The few Dementors patrolling around the school had passed over briefly when he first arrived. Luckily Lupin's spell allowed Harry to sleep through the short contact without showing too many signs of trauma.

Remus explained why Harry needed to arrive at the school as part of the luggage, but nobody had warned him how rough the elves were when they didn't think anybody was watching.

Maybe nobody knew.

'Oooh, what a nice birdie,' crooned a young looking elf, as it picked up Harry's cage and smiled. "Cookie will like him lots!"

Harry squawked again and considered taking off a chuck of the elf's finger. He had limited experience with House-elves, Dobby being the only one he had ever seen, but he was fairly sure they would value their digits, even if they did wear pillowcases in place of robes.

"Bad Nifty!" yelled another elf, swatting the one holding Harry hard enough to rattle the cage again. "Birdie not for Cookie, birdie for new Professor-man. Naughty Nifty, always trying to give pets to Cookie. Nifty is a bad elf!"

"Nifty is a good elf! He brings Cookie lots of good things he finds, he does!" yelled the first elf, shaking Harry's cage to make a point. "Sama is the BAD ELF, always trying to get Nifty in trouble."

"SAMA IS A GOOD ELF!" screamed the second elf, throwing one of Lupin's smaller cases at the head of Nifty.

Nifty responded by tossing Harry's cage aside and launching himself at Sama, driving both elves to ground. As Harry's cage crashed to a stop against one wall, he was rewarded with an up-close-and-personal view of two elves pounding every inch of each other's exposed territory with their meaty little fists as they rolled about the small corridor while screeching like alley cats.

Behind the combatants were several other elves carrying the remainder of Lupin's luggage. They shook their heads and clucked disapprovingly, but clutched the luggage tightly and continued on their merry way as if the scene of two servants trying to bite each other's noses off was an everyday event.

Of course, it might well be, thought Harry. For all I know about House-elves, they might do this all the time.

Although wary that he could end up on the menu, and unnaturally fascinated by the ongoing brawl, Harry managed to tune out the fighting elves and pay attention to the surroundings outside of his dented cage.

It looked like he was getting taken to Lupin's rooms via passages he had never seen before. They were considerably lower than the normal Hogwarts corridors, and rather poorly illuminated. Probably

only the elves knew and used them, although Filch probably patrolled here as well, since he seemed to go everywhere else.

In a few minutes, he would be inside Lupins quarters and safe from the horrid creatures searching for him outside - Dumbledore assured Lupin the guards were not allowed on the school grounds.

Suddenly, his cage crashed against the wall of the corridor, knocking him out of his thoughts again as the two battling elves rolled into it. Nifty now had a good hold of Sama's ears and looked like he was trying to pull them off, while Sama held onto Nifty's nose with her teeth and tried to strangle him with her hands.

Safe, if he survived the short trip in the tender care of the elves!

Ron stalked the dark corridors of Hogwarts almost as silently as any ghost.

The spell cast on his shoes made sure no footsteps would betray his presence, and Harry's invisibility cloak kept the possibility of anybody other than the Headmaster seeing him to virtual nil.

He would have gotten into a lot of trouble for stealing Harry's possessions, had anybody thought to inventory them before they were confiscated by the Ministry. As it was, he had made sure to hide the cloak, broom, and photo album, and set Hedwig free, before anybody could lay claim to his best friend's meagre belongings.

Harry wouldn't care too much about anything else, except maybe the handmade jumpers, but Ron hadn't been able to take everything. He had grabbed what he knew Harry would miss the most, besides his wand - which had been unavoidably confiscated by the Ministry.

The rest of Harry's 'stolen' things were secreted away at the Burrow, but Ron took the cloak with him to hospital. His original intention was to escape using it, and then try to jail-break Harry, but security was far too tight for him to get out of the ward, let alone the building.

Not that being able to become invisible hadn't come in handy while he was being 'treated' for his condition. Many interesting meetings

and conversations were eavesdropped on from under that cloak, but now it was being used for its undoubtedly intended purpose:

Ron was going to play a prank.

Silently and unseen, he made his way down the darkened flights of stairs on his way to the dungeons - a bag of dungbombs safely tucked into a pocket of his robes.

There was a corridor that he had seen all of the Slytherins walking down to get to their common room, and a suit of armour near its end.

The plan was a simple one. He was going to charm the armour to wait until the corridor was busy, and then toss the foul smelling pellets into the crowd of Slytherins.

While not particularly clever or inventive, it had the beauty of simplicity and a high likelihood of success without much risk, especially since he had a cast iron alibi in that he appeared to be currently sitting in the common room doing homework with Hermione.

It was also only one of many such incidents he convinced his brothers and other accomplices to arrange, all part of a vendetta on Malfoy and his goons.

The twins, former terrors of the school and biggest trouble makers it had seen for decades, were badly affected by the incidents of last year, even more so than Ron himself.

After losing their baby sister, seeing their younger brother dragged off to a mental hospital, and angry fighting inside of their family, the two sunk into a depressed state so low that their seemingly irrepressible spirits appeared to be broken.

Their normally brilliant smiles and irreverent attitudes disappeared almost overnight as their mother's harsh admonishments regarding responsibilities sunk in. The twins realised just how much they had let down their younger siblings by not paying enough attention to things that mattered – like how badly Ginny had been fairing in her first year. Prat Percy had been more compassionate and tried to help her as

best he could, but the twins were too busy having fun to look out for their only sister.

Now, even their grades had now improved, although none of their professors, except Snape, seemed to take any pleasure from it – the rest acted like they actually missed some of the chaos that marked the twins' first four years.

One of the first things Ron decided on returning to school, was that they needed some serious cheering up. After many unsuccessful attempts he was convinced the best way was to appeal to a fundamental part of their psyche by pranking gits who desperately deserved it.

He knew they were feeling needlessly guilty, that their mother's grief made her wrongly turn on them in anger, and he believed there was only one way to show them that they had not been responsible for what had happened. He had to take up the mantle they dropped and start creating the sort of mischief and mayhem that made them so popular, and feared.

Lee Jordan was actually the instigator.

The older boy's theory was that once he, and a few other accomplices, started pranking the Slytherins without serious consequence, the twin's interest would get piqued and they would feel compelled to join in.

Until Ron returned, nobody else was willing to take the risk of attracting the Slytherin's ire. Ron eagerly agreed to help his brother's best friend, especially since he thought Lee's plan had a good chance of kicking the twins out of their doldrums and starting them on the path to true recovery.

Even if it didn't though, it would feel good to take the arrogant Death Eater wannabees down a notch or two with some public displays of embarrassment.

Hermione at first disagreed with his reasoning and tried to talk him out of it, appealing to his more mature side, but it hadn't taken

Malfoy's taunts long to change her tune. She even taught Ron the spells he needed for this prank.

Faint voices echoing down the long corridor made Ron freeze in his tracks. It only took a few seconds for him to realise that at least two people were coming towards him, and one of them was Professor Snape.

Hastily Ron ducked down behind the armour he had targeted for the prank, praying silently that the other person wasn't Dumbledore who Harry had once told him could likely see through the blanket.

Seconds later, Ron knew his luck was running sour, as Dumbledore's voice clearly rang out in response to Snape's whining, nasal tones.

"-And I have explained many times, Severus. Remus Lupin has my complete confidence. His condition will not seriously impact upon his ability to conduct lessons and he is quite qualified to complete the course Gilderoy was following, although I hope to encourage him to alter it substantially."

"I am not overly concerned with his ability to mark assignments, Headmaster," snapped Snape impatiently. "I am worried that his mere *presence* will lower the perceived standards of the school so greatly that students till be writing home before the week is out."

The two were almost level to Ron now, but he had no choice except to crouch down behind the statue and try to make himself as small as possible in the vain hope he would not be spotted. Close to panicking, he suddenly felt cold and clammy.

"Severus, I fear you are merely over reacting based on the incident with Professor Lupin's familiar-"

"IT PURPOSELY RELIEVED ITSELF ON MY TROUSER LEG!"
Snape yelled.

The echo of his voice filled the empty hallways as it flooded the castle and Ron was forced to hastily clamp a hand over his mouth to stifle the laugh that suddenly tried to escape.

The pair of professors came to a complete stop just a few feet from where he was crouching in the shadow of the armour. Luckily, the Headmaster's back was towards Ron and neither of them heard his slip.

"I will thank you not to raise your voice in that manner while addressing me," said the Headmaster, so coldly that Ron felt a shiver run down his spine.

He had never heard Dumbledore talk to anybody that way before, not even at Harry's trial. Snape too apparently recognised he had crossed some unmarked line and hastily down played his outburst.

"My apologies, Headmaster. I did not mean to, but I am sure the actions of Lupin's pet were premeditated and designed to enrage me," said Snape, almost sounding human, and very contrite.

"Successfully so, it would seem," said the Headmaster, turning away from Snape to start walking down the corridor again. "Now, tell me, have you made any further discoveries about the Chamber?"

"Unfortunately not, Headmaster. It continues to defy me and keep its secrets well hidden. I fear I am unable to learn more than we already know. Are you still intending to tell the Weasley girl's parents of your findings?"

"Yes. I feel, and Professor McGonagall agrees with me, that they deserve to know it may yet be possible to save their daughter; however small the possibility."

As the two figures turned a corner, Ron almost forgot to breathe a sigh of relief at how unbelievably close he had come to getting caught; his mind was struggling to process what he thought he had just heard.

Snape was trying to get into the Chamber of secrets, probably to find out what really happened and to get the Diary and Basilisk.

Dumbledore had found out something that could help Ginny.

While Ron's first instinct was to run back to the common room to tell Hermione and his brothers the news, he forced himself to stop and think about the consequences first, just as his healers had drilled into him.

If the Headmaster told his parents, they in turn would likely inform him and his brothers, unless it was too faint a possibility to ever become reality. If he told his siblings himself now, and they in turn interrogated his parents, he would have to explain how and when he had overheard the Headmaster. That would likely get him in trouble for wandering around the school at night, especially once Bighead Boy Percy found out.

No. He would tell Hermione; that went without saying, but he would wait awhile before saying anything to his brothers, giving his parents a chance to deal with it first. There had been enough in-fighting in his family without him needlessly causing another round of accusations and recriminations.

With that decision made, he took out the bag of dungbombs and turned back to the suit of armour with a large smile on his face.

"You didn't think I had forgotten about you, did you, my friend?" he asked the shiny suit.

Surprisingly, it creaked in response.

"Molly," said the Headmaster. "It is important that you understand that I cannot promise even a slim chance of success. All I can say is that I have been given more information about the possible cause of your daughter's condition, and that gives us new avenues to explore for her recovery."

The gaunt features of Molly Weasley watched him closely. Her normally plump face had lost all of its softness as the Weasley matriarch's weight had plummeted in the aftermath of Ginny's loss. Her skin hung loosely on her frame, clearly an effect of the months of strain and anguish she had been experiencing.

“But, Albus,” she said. “I don’t understand why St. Mungos can’t treat her. Surely you can tell them what you have learned, so they can try?”

The Headmaster shook his head sadly, took another sip of his tea, and decided to try a different tactic.

“Arthur, what is current the feeling at the Ministry regarding Gilderoy Lockhart?” he asked Molly’s husband, who was sitting next to his wife on their threadbare lounge.

Albus felt discussing the removal of their daughter from professional care in order to subject her to experimentation was best done in the comfortable surrounds of the Burrow where the comforts of home might help to keep the distraught parents calm enough to consider his proposal reasonable. It was another manipulation, but a worthy one.

“They are saying he will be the next Minister of Magic,” answered Arthur, with more than a hint of disgust in his voice. “Lucius Malfoy is said to have already began renovations on what will be his office, as Senior Undersecretary. There’s quite a few new people wandering around the Ministry lately, people I would not normally associate with, if you take my meaning. Rumour has it they will be the new Heads, once Lockhart is in power.”

“What would happen if it was discovered Ginny might recover, and possibly support Mr. Potter’s version of events prior to her coma?” asked Albus, knowing full and well what the reaction to his question would be.

Molly gasped and Arthur went white as they realised what the headmaster was implying.

“Are you saying they would stop her treatment?” asked Molly, her voice rising in pitch as she spoke and an angry blush starting to redden her face.

Had the discussion not been so serious, Albus would have smiled in joy at what he clearly saw as a bit of the old headstrong Molly he knew and loved rising to the surface of the despondent woman’s demeanour.

"The possibility that they might even go further than that was only recently brought to my attention," agreed Albus.

"Can they do that?" she asked Arthur.

Arthur's face somehow became even whiter.

"If Lockhart becomes Minister, and Lucius is his second, they'll be able to pass decrees and other rubbish to do whatever they want, for a while," he said. "They could say they need to protect her and lock her up where we can't get to her, and then stop any treatment, or order something bad for her. We would never know."

"Indeed," agreed Albus sadly.

He hated playing on people's fears, manipulating them like this, but they needed to see the truth and make up their mind. Putting down his cup he rose to leave.

"Molly, Arthur, I can only imagine what you are going through at this moment, so I think it would be best if I were to leave you for a while to discuss this matter on your own. Possibly you may wish to involve the rest of your family, as it is their sister's future we are deciding. Rest assured, even if you choose to trust in the professions at St. Mungos, I will support your decision and endeavour to ensure they provide the best care for young Miss Weasley possible."

Arthur nodded as Molly sat quietly, apparently lost in thought.

"Thank you, Albus. I know we were wrong when we blamed you, and I am eternally grateful that you have forgiven us-" began the balding man.

"Please, Arthur," interrupted Albus, his guilt not allowing Arthur to leave him off the hook completely. "I must accept a large measure of responsibility."

"Nevertheless," continued Arthur. "We appreciate your help-"

"Albus," interrupted Molly. "What of Harry? We wronged him so badly, Albus."

Albus paused, wary of placing more emotional strain on the suffering parents.

“Molly, unless Harry surrenders himself to me, I am very limited in what I can do for him. However, I do not believe he will seek me out – his trust in me may be irrevocably lost.”

Molly nodded vaguely, her expression still thoughtful. “Is there any chance he may try to reach Ginny?”

Again Dumbledore paused, the question catching him by surprise.

Would Harry likely try to seek out the girl? He had certainly been distraught at her condition – a fact played upon by Malfoy during the trial. Could the boy now believe he might help her? It was impossible to know what damage had been caused to his mind after exposure to both the Dementors and his deranged Godfather. What did Molly think Harry was planning?

A blinding flash of insight granted him understanding; Molly was worried Harry was now insane and may seek revenge on the people who failed him when he needed them the most!

“Unfortunately, I can not, with any certainty, say whether he will or will not, Molly,” he answered, careful not to give her a false impression.

Molly nodded again with Arthur watching her closely, clearly unsure what track his wife’s thoughts were following.

“Then take her, Albus. Take her to Hogwarts and do what you can. If Harry,” she stopped, a sob escaping before she managed to regain control. “If Harry comes after her, it would be best if he had to go to Hogwarts, so that you have a chance to rescue him.”

With those words, Molly broke down and started weeping. Arthur rushed to comfort her, wrapping his arms around the formerly plump woman as she howled her misery.

Albus nodded and left silently, his own emotions too close to the surface for him to offer any comfort. Although he had achieved the outcome he desired, it did not give him any satisfaction.

Closing the door behind him, the old man had to take several deep breaths before he felt calm enough to Apparate to St. Mungos long term ward.

He had a new patient to collect for Madam Pomfrey, and then, an old enemy to confront.

In the small room at the top of the tower, Sibyll Trelawney looked down at the broken tea cup in confusion.

She had been sitting in the Divination classroom, having a nice spot of tea while waiting for her next batch of students - It was always so gratifying to see the eager young mites pile into her room to watch with amazement and wonder as she showed them the art of telling the future - but now her cup was lying shattered at her feet, and she had no memory of dropping it.

“Professor, are you all right?” asked a young voice, startling the dumfounded professor out of her stupor.

‘What? Oh, yes. Yes dear, I am fine,” she said, looking up at the young girl who had apparently just entered the room. “Just dozed off for a moment, that’s all. It’s a hazard of spending so much time in the *between* places, my dear.”

The girl nodded acceptance of the unlikely excuse and took her seat as more students began filtering into the room.

I need to make sure I get to bed a bit earlier tonight, thought Sibyl to herself, recalling the bottle of sherry that had kept her company while marking assignments quite late the night before. *Falling asleep during my own class would be disastrous. It doesn't take much talent to predict what catty McGonagall would say if she heard about that!*

Satisfied that action would ensure that she would not fall victim to another inappropriate bout of sleepiness, she set about guiding her charges in the ancient art of Divination.

The only thing left nagging her was a vague worry that she did not recall singing, well not that much, and so had no idea why her throat was so sore –

Yet again.

Harry watched from his high perch as Padfoot loped through the school. Wherever the massive dog went, it attracted attention.

At first it was students screaming in fear that a Grim, the wizarding world's symbol of impending death, had invaded the castle. More recently it was from the bolder students, girls especially, who seemed to be unable to resist stopping and patting the huge hound as it lounged about.

Sirius shamelessly played it up, of course – often rolling on his back to encourage the students to scratch his belly. He claimed the attention had something to do with women being unable to resist a 'bad-boy' look, even if it was only a mangy dog.

When confronted by Lupin after unsuccessfully trying to follow a group of seventh years into the prefects' bathroom, the Animagus was only slightly contrite.

"Come on, Moony. I am just having a bit of fun," Sirius whined, while Harry tried in vain to contain his laughter at the image of the Grim being driven away by girls using various cosmetic charms.

Remus was not impressed and threatened many dire and cruel punishments should Sirius continue in his perverted ways.

"Merlin's beard, Sirius, you are not a teenager anymore! If you so much as think about going anywhere near where adolescent girls are likely to be wearing anything less than full robes, I'll ask Hagrid to help me neuter you," threatened Remus.

"But, Moony," Sirius continued. "The girls tell the best gossip. That's how we know what's going on around here."

"Or I'll offer to let him cross breed you with one of his pets," continued Remus, unmoved by Sirius's weak reasoning. "One of the meaner ones."

"What about the teachers then?" asked Sirius hopefully. "Sinistra is a bit of 'all right'. "Can I at least curl up by her fire every now and then? Maybe lick her toes a bit?"

Remus let out an exasperated sigh.

“Fine - fine, but no more sticking your nose into anybody’s crutch, especially not while they are eating, and you,” he said, turning his ire on Harry. “Some of the students have been complaining about the number of birds apparently hanging around the castle. It seems anybody who steps outside gets fouled from unseen assailants. It has gotten bad enough for a few students to ask Flitwick if there is a dropping-repellent charm.”

“It’s not everyone, only the Slytherins,” explained Harry, once he had recovered from laughing at Sirius. “Oh, and a couple of ‘puffs coped it once. I missed Draco because he started running as soon as he got out the front doors – ruddy chicken. I just wish Snape went outside more often...”

“Well cut it down. We can’t afford to have people noticing you too, not with Padfoot here molesting children,” said Remus, shooting another disgusted glare at Sirius, who tried to look apologetic.

Sirius was behaving himself somewhat since then, but still took every opportunity to interact with the inhabitants of the castle. Harry wondered if it was because the man was forced to forgo such contact for so long that he appeared to long for it now.

Harry, on the other hand, was finding it extremely difficult to even go near his former friends.

The pain seeing Ron and Hermione was fading, but it still felt like a fire in his chest. He sometimes spent time watching them though, often sitting in on their classes, looking on in secret from the rafters.

The potion’s classroom was spared his presence, knowing the temptation of ‘helping Snape’s hair style along’ could be too great for him to resist.

He had been surprised, and a little upset, by Ron and Hermione’s new relationship. It hurt seeing them so close and happy without him, and disturbed him to see Ron turning ‘mushy’.

The healers at St Mungo had a lot to answer for, as far as Harry was concerned.

Then again, Harry was having a hard time dealing with his mixed feelings. He knew that his jealousy and anger were unwarranted, but that didn't stop him feeling it. Judging from the way Ron handled his temper and emotions now days, a bit of professional help might not have go astray for Harry, or Sirius for that matter.

On the other hand, resisting the urge to reveal himself to them was easier when he kept a bit of the anger inside, countering the pang of loneliness at seeing them and not being able to join them.

It had not taken long for Harry to notice how busy the couple were. They seemed to be constantly on the go, running from one classroom to the next, and were also apparently taking some extra tutoring sessions with a variety of teachers and older students.

Harry quickly gave up trying to work out a pattern to their mad-cap rushing from one place to another, and settled down to a routine of attending only selected classes he found interesting. Needless to say, most of his time was spent in the DADA classes watching Remus teach.

He was right about the werewolf; the man was a natural teacher. Students quickly took to the friendly and approachable professor, despite the sudden and drastic rewrite of their curriculum.

All in all, school, Harry found, was much more enjoyable when he didn't have to worry about excessive homework, tests, gossip, or house points. He noticed he was paying much more attention to the 'interesting bits' in class than he ever did while a 'real' student.

Practical demonstrations and lessons were his favourite; books just not holding the same allure for him as they did for Hermione.

History of magic was not attended after the first time he fell asleep.

It was astounding to discover just how many other animals roamed the castle. Previously, as a human, he never payed any attention to them, and missed noticing how many people brought along familiars.

While the animals spend the majority of their time in the various common rooms, enough occasionally played outside to make it a very distracting place for an avian predator.

He hadn't seen any rats yet though.

Remus drew the elder Weasley, Percy, into a conversation and discovered Scabbers disappeared before Ron was taken away. Percy was under the impression his pet passed away due to Ron's neglect.

When he was not begging for attention, Padfoot was busy searching the school for any hint that the traitor may be hidden away somewhere. His sensitive nose was well suited to the task, but as yet had not turned up any signs.

The two fugitives spent most of the rest of their time in Remus's quarters, in safety and true comfort. One large room had been converted, by Professor Dumbledore himself no less, to resemble a forest, with living trees and grass. The roof magically reflected the sky outside, giving a wonderful, open feeling to the magically enlarged space. This room was heavily fortified for Remus to use on nights of the full moon.

Even with the Wolfsbane potion Snape supplied, having somewhere safe to run and play made the werewolf transition much easier to handle, and a great deal of fun for Padfoot.

Harry was still not allowed to participate, just in case.

The border of the school, including the Forbidden Forest was regularly patrolled by small groups of Dementors, as was Hogsmeade, much to the disgust of students, teachers, and residents alike. This pretty much put the forest out of bounds for all of them, even the werewolf, so their wandering and exercise was confined to the school grounds.

After settling in, the three fell into a pattern of sorts.

Harry and Sirius helped Remus with his workload, often marking quizzes and going over the teaching plans. Remus appeared to appreciate honest feedback on his classes, even the ones where

Harry had no idea what was being taught because it was way too advanced for him.

The amount of magic Harry was learning and doing was staggering, when compared to his first two years at school, but it was very biased towards the practical side of subject, since he could practice that on his own and lacked the inclination to read a lot.

None of them felt ready to extend the search for the rat outside of the school, yet, especially while the two convicts were still healing from their ordeal.

Silently dropping from his perch, Harry soared through the corridors and headed for an open door or window leading out. Hopefully the weather would be good for a spot of flying.

One thing he missed from his time on the run with Sirius was the amount of flying he done while staying at The Lodge. He still managed to get out for an hour or so, usually at the end of each day. Thankfully he only needed to deliver a few local messages each week to keep up appearances, but flying around inside the castle somehow made him feel claustrophobic.

The atmosphere that permeated the school was depressing too. He saw how the Slytherins were 'lording' it over the others, and it made him angry enough to want to risk everything and do something about it.

It took a supreme effort of willpower to not dive-bomb Malfoy every single time he saw him, or Snape for that matter.

At least somebody was pranking the gits, making them a little less secure and more humble. Remus told him the spell used to make the paintings loudly flatulent whenever Draco walked passed them had been a 'very nice piece of work – at least fifth year level'.

Bursting out of the door into bright sunlight, Harry banked steeply and climbed rapidly to circle over the school. Everything looked different from up high; the busy coming and goings of the students making the building look like an ant's nest.

Harry turned lazy circles over the castle, careful to keep an eye out for the foul Dementors that occasionally patrolled the boundaries.

Remus was working with both fugitives, trying to teach them the charm that would drive the beasts away, but so far they were having limited success. Harry was able to produce a mist that would keep one at bay for a little while, but Sirius had difficulty finding a happy enough thought to even get that far.

Harry banked again and caught another thermal, taking him high above the ancient castle, before drawing his wings in to fall into a steep dive.

The memory of pure exhilaration like this was enough to make the mist, but he knew the sight of his godfather having enough joy inside of him to make his own barrier would be a stronger basis.

If it ever came to be.

Pulling out of the high-speed swoop brought him close to a series of familiar windows. Noticing several open, he slowed further and guided himself to a gentle landing on the edge near the back of the building.

I can't possibly go a year without visiting, he thought.

The moment he touched down, the sickly stench of antiseptic assaulted his nostrils. It took a few minutes for him to overcome the fumes of various chemicals and potions, and be able to look into Infirmary.

Madam Pomfrey was bustling about, tending several students who appeared to be suffering from a common mysterious complaint. It wasn't until Harry recognised the purple, blistered face of Neville Longbottom that he realised what probably happened; another potions accident.

It was oddly comforting to know somethings never changed.

For the longest time she felt lost.

At first, her master was somewhere she could not go, and none felt need of her company or skills. Her life became a repetition of hunting, eating, sleeping, and waiting; waiting for a purpose to renew her spirit.

Then she felt her master return to places she could travel to, but he did not summon her, and no other called for her to render service to him.

Eventually, after a seeming eternity of nothing but the mundane act of living, she felt the faint flutter again; the stirring of the magic imbedded deep inside.

It was weak, very weak, but it was definitely there.

Others would dismiss it as a trick of wishful imagination, or they would be too caught up in their day to day lives to notice or pay attention, but of all her brethren, she was always the more sensitive and responsive to the often subtle magic. It was a part of her personality that she instantly recognised the minute variations of the magical bonding for what they truly were.

She would soon be needed again.

Launching from the branch in the upper canopy of the pine where she was resting, she spread her magnificent white wings and expertly caught a slight breeze rising from the forest floor and into the star-studded sky.

It was going to be a long flight to reach the destination, but Hedwig the owl knew she would make the journey in time – it was a skill the noble bird was particularly proud of.

She was wanted again. Life was good.

“Come on, Fred. We can do this.”

“I know, I know. It just doesn’t feel right. You know, to be out and about again, like we used to. Not with, well, you know.”

“I know mate, but Ron’s right. We can’t stop living because something bad happened. It’s not like we had anything to do with it.”

“That’s just the point, and you know it. We should have had something to do with it – we should have stopped it.”

“We’ve been over this, Fred. I know exactly how you feel, and I feel exactly the same way, but what do you reckon she would want us to be doing? Behaving ourselves and being good boys? Cripes, even Percy admitted to Lee that he was worried at how badly we were handling this.”

“Pfffttt. Percy just feels bad because he can’t tell us off for anything anymore-”

“Now, now, enough of that, then. It’s time we show these amateurs how a real prank is done. Got the glue?”

“Check.”

“Blue duck feathers?”

“Check.”

“Giant goanna.”

“Check.”

“Right. Check if the coast is clear and let’s get on with it already.”

“All right. Hang on to Estelle here while I have a look.”

“Estelle?”

“She likes it better than Walter.”

“Fair enough. Hand her over. Ooohfff. Damn she’s heavy.”

“Well that many sequins will weigh a bit, my brother. Okay, here we go – BLOODY HELL!”

Padfoot was on a trail.

The scent was faint, possibly several hours old. Numerous students had wandered over it, obscuring the faint trace of his prey, but not completely destroying it, and Padfoot was very good at following faint trails.

Padfoot was hunting.

Sirius knew he wasn't quite logical anymore. Spending too much time in animal form done strange things to a man, but so did a dozen years in Azkaban. The two together should have made him completely insane.

Mind you, he could be. Does a madman know he is bonkers? What about a dog?

Maybe, but Padfoot didn't care, not when he had the trail of a scent in his nose. A sudden increase in the strength of the prey's trail brought him up sharply.

Padfoot was getting closer.

Excitement made his heart beat faster, and drool began to leak from his chops as his tongue fell out in anticipation. Not long now. Just a few minutes more and his prey would be his.

Long loping strides ate the distance away as the hound moved through the hallways. Not many students were in this part of the castle, making running easier. His powerful paws moved almost completely silently on the cold flagstones, despite the pace of his travelling.

Padfoot loved to run, especially when he hunted.

The wizard had many doubts and worries. Fear was his constant companion, despite the monumental efforts of his friend and godson. When they didn't know he was watching, he saw the looks they occasionally gave each other, and sensitive ears picked up conversations not meant to be heard.

They were concerned that they were not helping him enough. Momentary flashbacks that made the wizard freeze up were still occurring, and that worried them. They covered them up well enough, not mentioning anything beyond acknowledging them happening, but deep down it still worried them all.

Padfoot didn't care, or fear. He was hunting, nothing else mattered.

Sirius knew he was getting better, but truly believed he would never be whole again. Harry made a remarkable recovery, but he was a remarkable boy. If nothing else, just having met Harry made Sirius's life a whole lot better. The pranks helped too, as did teaching Harry magic. Sometimes it felt like he was back in time with Moony and Prongs doing homework, then thoughts of Wormtail would arise.

Padfoot rumbled a throaty growl. He was almost there.

Remus was more concerned than Harry; the werewolf knowing better how changed Sirius was. Thankfully he didn't say too much to the boy, preferring to keep Sirius's secrets between them. It was good that Remus trusted him, because Sirius wasn't sure how much trust he had left in him.

Padfoot trusted. He trusted his nose that was urging him on, pushing him forward faster, he trusted his legs and paws that carried him ever closer to his prey, and he trusted his teeth that could bite and maul, defending or attacking whenever it was needed.

The wizard could hide it most of the time, the worry, and the fear, but knowing neither of his friends would care if he didn't hide it made all the difference. There was no pressure to be perfect, no role he had to fill – he was Sirius, and he was Padfoot - that was all.

A sudden yelp startled Sirius out of his thoughts, and he realised Padfoot had his prey.

"You naughty dog," laughed Professor Sinistra, bending down to pick up the papers she dropped when Padfoot's muzzle found her. "I don't know how you always manage to find me just as my class is finished, but you are going to have to tone down your greetings a tad, little puppy."

Sirius/Padfoot smiled mischievously and wagged their tail in happiness.

Hermione reached for the next ingredient of the potion, but paused just as she was about to add it. Squeezing the supposedly dry stingers between her fingers, she detected the merest hint of moisture.

“Excuse me, Professor Snape,” she called, ignoring the groans from the other students. “I think these Billiwig stingers are not dry enough to use, sir. They will likely ruin the potion.”

Hermione held her breath as Snape whirled from where he had once again being needlessly berating Neville on his abysmal potion skills, and stomped over to her desk.

While the Gryffindors were having an even worse time of it without Harry to bear the brunt of the most hated Professor’s attacks, Hermione noticed the man didn’t seem to take as much pleasure in it as he used to. His barbs and threats were lacking a certain passion that made them so vicious previously.

“Are the school’s potions ingredients not good enough for you, Miss Granger? Perhaps you are longing to return to an environment where you do not have to deal with sharing with your fellow classmates?”

Hermione could almost feel Ron’s anger building and hoped he was not holding a knife, but she couldn’t help feel the snarky professor’s taunt was less that on a par with his biting comments of previous years.

The Slytherin’s giggled gleefully anyway.

Instead of replying or trying to justify herself as she would have done normally, Hermione took some advice Ron passed on from a therapists.

She looked directly at the Professor without showing any reaction to his words and waited patiently.

Eventually he seemed to realise she was not taking the bait, another sure sign he was not acting *normally*.

“Well don’t just stand there, you foolish girl. Go to my store room and get replacements,” he snarled, turning away. “Be certain to retrieve enough for anybody else who is *unable to cope* with what they have.”

The way he threw the last statement took away any joy she may have felt at her success in not reacting to his earlier attack.

She smiled reassuringly at Ron before walking to the large storage room. Her boyfriend looked ready to disembowel professor Snape with the silver measuring spoon, but turned back to his own potion without comment.

Once inside the room, and out of sight of the rest of the class, Hermione let out a huge sigh of relief.

Potions was definitely the hardest class for them to catch up on, even with the steps they had taken to gain extra time to study. Hermione had no problem memorising the ingredients and the steps, unlike Ron who was struggling, but attending the required practical class sessions was proving to be both of their downfalls.

It was just not an environment conducive to learning, and sometimes it took them hours to calm down enough afterwards to continue studying productively.

Searching the rows of jars lining the shelves, she briefly wondered why wizards insisted on seemingly random ways of organising things. Had the shelves been in some sort of sensible, logical order, alphabetical for instance, she would have been able to find the stingers almost immediately.

Instead, it appeared Professor Snape had decided to order the shelves by varying degrees of lethality combined with some other factor probably not known to another living soul. As such, Hermione took a full five minutes to locate the relatively harmless stingers.

She took a moment before leaving the room to mentally brace herself for the inevitable verbal attack when she returned to class. It was

then she noticed the slightly ajar lid of a box sitting right at the end of the shelf, signifying deadly contents. Unlike most of the others, no label adorned the container, spiking her interest in its contents.

Allowing her curiosity to overcome her reservations, Hermione opened the lid and peered in.

At first she couldn't make heads or tails out of the jumble of long bone fragments, but then a single piece caught her eye. She picked it up carefully, using her robes so as not to touch it with her bare skin.

With a sudden sickening feeling in her stomach, she guessed she was holding the broken end of a large fang.

Without knowing how she knew, and with no conscious reason for it, she was willing to bet it was a Basilisk fang.

The crack of an apparition echoed through the vast cavern, returning almost as loud as when it left, before fading off into the darkness. Dim, yellow light spilled weakly from ancient light globes that hung suspended from long cables, bathing the huge room in a sickly glow that barely gave form to the vast shapes dwarfing the old man.

As the echo receded into the distance, Albus stood still, not daring to move out of the one spot he knew to be perfectly safe to appear in.

His wand was raised, ready to defend against any attack, but even his breathing was kept shallow, for fear of accidentally setting off one or more of the hundreds of traps and wards that protected the entrance point to what was likely the most heavily fortified underground complex since the pharaohs built their elaborate hidden palaces under what was now the sands of the desert.

The chamber had once held an army of Inferi - Muggle victims of an evil man, murdered and raised to serve as an undead army of guards. The hundred thousand walking corpses had been systematically purged from the tunnels and rooms decades ago; their bodies laid to rest with the cleansing purity of magical flame, but it was always possible some had escaped and were still wandering the dark passageways.

When nothing moved to disturb the gloom, Albus sighed and began the long trek to the barricaded sanctum that lay at the centre of the immense warren.

Along either side of him, rows of enormous war machines sat, waiting for the day when their creator would release them from stasis to unleash their destructive might upon the world.

Lines of gigantic army tanks, so large that they could not move, had they not been enchanted, towered over rows of exotic looking aeroplanes that bore no propeller or jet.

Racks of rifles, of unheard of calibres and that needed no ammunition, stood in neat columns reaching almost to the dark roof above. Enormous battleships, some big enough to carry planes on their decks, lay in dry docks, miles from any waterway large enough to float them.

Many more machines, whose purpose could not be guessed at first glance, stood silently, un-rusting and in perpetual readiness.

It was an arsenal built for an Armageddon that had narrowly been avoided – the true ‘final solution’.

Albus had no eyes for the tools of destruction that stretched far further than should have been possible, given the size of the mountain sitting above them.

Five decades ago, he had vowed to one-day dispose of these machines, all seven levels of them. The wards and other protections designed to keep them intact for the next thousand years, or release them all at the first sign of tampering, were too much for the thinly stretched resources of the magical world to then tackle.

The devastated-by-war Magical communities of the time simply could not have summoned the organisation or manpower to remove the immensely complex spells that threatened to unleash unholy machines at the first error.

So he hid it, secreting the entrance behind a spell that made access impossible without his direct authorisation. The few that knew were

oath-sworn to silence, and their numbers decreased with each passing decade.

Albus returned a few times after activating his complex protections, to renew the charm keeping it all hidden. The last time had an additional purpose, and that visit, almost two years ago, had tested his skill and power to its utmost.

Luckily, due to his relatively recent visit, he had a good idea of what he was to face this time, although the ever-changing nature of the defences meant he would not encounter exactly the same challenges again.

As if in response to his thoughts, a wall of purple flame suddenly leaped up in front of him, so close that it almost singed his beard before he threw himself backwards and raised a shield to keep from being incinerated.

Mumbling words that would incur a month of detentions if they were uttered by any student at his school, Albus cast the counter curse, sinking the fire back down into the floor from where it had sprang, and continued on his way, determined to keep his thoughts focussed on the task at hand.

A Hippogriff is not really a proud creature.

It may not be quite as smart as a dog, or as cunning as a fox, but the magic inherent in its blood gave it an intelligence of a different sort. That very same intelligence recognised potential equals in wizards.

It also gave the beast the ability to recognise an ally, or a foe, mainly through the proper forms of respect. The strange twisting of its unnatural mind allowed it to know if a person was truly being respectful, and therefore friendly, or if the person was likely to be a threat.

Buckbeak knew without a shadow of a doubt that the wizard clutching its bloodied arm and screaming while lying in a rapidly spreading pool of blood at the Hippogriff's feet was not an ally, and moved to act accordingly.

Unfortunately, somebody jumped in between it and the soon to be non-existent threat, stopping the process of answering the challenge given through displays of arrogance in place of respect.

Hagrid's huge bulk and enormous strength could probably have physically stopped Buckbeak from finishing the job of eliminating the threat, but as a recognised ally, it was not necessary.

Buckbeak stepped back and allowed Hagrid to remove the defeated enemy, satisfied for the moment that it had provided an adequate defence.

"Don't you see, Hermione?" Ron almost shouted. "I heard Snape telling Dumbledore that he hadn't gotten into the Chamber, but the fangs prove he has! You know how much the great git hated Harry. He's hiding the evidence I tell you - probably cutting it up and taking it away so nobody will ever find it and prove Harry was telling the truth."

Hermione only waited until after classes had ended to tell Ron of her discovery. He hadn't flown off the handle and tried to confront Snape directly, but it was testing all of his new resolve to be reasonable and not do something drastic.

"It possible, Ron, but I could be wrong. It might not have been a Basilisk fang. I could just be jumping to conclusions," she said, voicing arguments she didn't really believe. "It might just be from a really big snake..."

Ron snorted derisively as he continued to pace the empty classroom where they had stopped.

"Hermione, you are the smartest witch in school, and you know it. There is basically no way you could be that wrong about something this important," he said, dismissing her arguments.

She felt a blush rise at his casually delivered compliment, but she did not let it distract her from her point.

"Thank you, Ronald, but we really can't be sure. Not with just my word to go on. Dumbledore isn't here, and Professor McGonagall

won't even listen to us if we try telling her, not after we got it so wrong in first year. We thought Snape was guilty of something then too."

"Yeah, but this time we can get proof," argued Ron.

"Ron, I am not even sure if the Headmaster is the right person to take this too," said Hermione sadly. "Look at the way he left Harry at the Dursleys. He knew what kind of a place it was. If only Harry has told us..."

Something in Ron's expression changed, and he squirmed uncomfortably.

"Ron? What is it?" she asked. Then her eyes lit up in realisation. "You knew, didn't you? He said something to you about the way his uncle treated him, didn't he?"

He couldn't look at her.

"He didn't say anything, Hermione. Not directly, but when we got out of the house after first year – well, we had to pull the bars off his window first. That's when I knew for sure something wasn't right," explained Ron sadly.

"Why didn't you say something to somebody?" asked an outraged Hermione.

"What good would it have? Harry obviously didn't want to talk about it, so I wasn't going to bug him. I didn't want to think about it really, and I don't reckon Harry did either. I convinced myself it couldn't have been too bad otherwise Dumbledore or somebody would have done something about it," he shrugged. "The twins said it might be normal for Muggles."

"That's outrageous!" Hermione said angrily. "They have Muggleborn friends. Didn't they think to ask?"

"I don't know. I told you I didn't want to think about it. Maybe Dumbledore didn't want to upset Harry by poking into his business or something. You know he has always been a bit barmy."

“Well that just confirms my doubts,” said Hermione. “We can’t go to Professor Dumbledore until we have somebody else identify they are Basilisk fangs.”

Ron stopped his pacing and looked at her, his face betraying excitement at an idea that obviously just occurred to him.

“Who else could tell you if it’s really a Basilisk fang?” he asked. “We could take a fang to somebody else,” he said. “We could either sneak inside using Harry’s cloak, or just find something wrong with another ingredient and grab one while in there, but who could we take it to once we got a hold of one?”

“Professor Lupin might know,” Hermione suggested, a bit surprised that she felt no desire to try talking Ron out of stealing from the potions professor, again. “He definitely knows his Dark Creatures, but it seems like he might be a bit of a stickler for the rules when it comes to important things. He’ll ask questions, and I think he is hiding something from us too, although I could be wrong.”

Ron nodded thoughtfully. “He seems a good bloke, but we don’t really know him, do we? It’s not like we have had a good run with Defence teachers so far, and I keep catching him watching us. I reckon that bird of his follows me sometimes too. He might even already be onto us. Anybody else?”

“Hagrid,” suggested Hermione, after a moment’s pause. “Nobody knows dangerous creatures better than Hagrid. If this fang belongs to anything other than a Basilisk, he’ll probably be able to tell us.”

“Good thinking,” agreed Ron. “George was telling me he heard there’s a bit of strife going on after Malfoy got skewered by Buckbeak. Said the git was threatening to have Hagrid locked up for allowing the hippogriff to hurt him. Bastard’s sending whiny letters to daddy-dear apparently.”

“How are Fred and George going?” asked Hermione, in a sudden change of subject.

She hadn’t had a chance to talk to the brothers much since Ron began trying to encourage their return to less scholarly ways, but had

noted an increased number of practical jokes occurring regularly around the school, including some quite disgusting ones involving bird droppings and a certain Slytherin.

Ron smiled.

“Good. Looks like it’s working, although they claim it’s not them doing all of the pranks,” he said. “Some of the more *interesting* ones have really gotten their attention, I reckon. I haven’t seen them this excited about anything since- well you know.”

Hermione nodded, suddenly a bit sorry she mentioned anything.

“Anyway, back to these fangs,” said Ron, not to be distracted. “Let’s go *back* and grab one later, a big one. Then we can nick down to Hagrid’s and have a chat to him while everyone thinks we are in class or something. Even if he can’t help us, it’ll be good just to visit him. We haven’t really done that since we came back.”

Hermione nodded, again surprised at Ron’s consideration. A year ago he would have never had considered that aspect of a visit.

“We can always take to it Professor Lupin afterwards,” she added.

“Okay,” agreed Ron. “Just make sure that dog of his doesn’t start sniffing you the way it keeps doing to Professor Sinistra. There’s something wrong with that animal I tell you.”

“Oh, Ron,” she laughed. “It’s just a dog. Dogs do that sort of thing.”

“That’s fine, just so long as it doesn’t start doing it to you,” he said soberly, then paused and thought for a bit. “Or to me, for that matter.”

Hermione laughed and began preparing to go back to get a fang.

Harry was frankly amazed and a little disgusted at how much schoolwork Hermione seemed to be getting Ron to do. They didn’t even appear to spend any free time between classes in the library or the Gryffindor common room. Both were places that Padfoot had not yet been able to search.

On the few occasions he saw Ron out on the Quidditch pitch having a fly, it felt like only a few minutes later that Harry found the red-head back inside with Hermione again.

It was lucky that their ridiculously busy schedule meant he did not as yet have to rely on the locating spell to help him find the two either, since it made him particularly disorientated in their case.

Remus thought it might have something to do with his emotional confusion with the 'targets'.

Unhelpfully, Sirius claimed it was because his tiny bird-brain was incapable of handling the task. He also enjoyed muttering bad jokes about the lousy jail-bird becoming a lousy mail-bird.

The only time Harry didn't see his two friends bustling around the place, was when he went for a fly after curfew, and even then he could have sworn that more than once he heard Hermione's giggling and Ron's deeper chuckle.

Right now it was nearing midnight, and he was heading back to Remus's quarters after having successfully charmed the benches in the great hall to stick to every Slytherin's robes when they ate blueberry muffins – Draco's favourites, of course.

The beauty was that no amount of countercharm or detection would work on the seats because it was the muffins that were charmed. Nobody else would be affected either, unless they wore the Slytherin crest on their robes and ate a blueberry muffin while seated.

It was the hardest piece of spellwork yet, and would surely satisfy Sirius's requirements for 'charms homework'.

Harry was struggling to come up with pranks that utilised the magic Sirius and Remus were teaching him. He was severely outclassed by the two Marauders, who had managed such mayhem as causing random people walking down a particular moving staircase to briefly believe they were naked, but he figured he had a lot of years practice to catch up on before he should start comparing himself.

“Don’t kid yourself,” Sirius told him one day. “Remus is a natural born jokester and needed no coaching at all. He hides it well, with that thin veneer of respectability, but underneath lies the instincts of a true menace to society. It will take a lot more than just practice to reach his level of deviousness.”

Their many pranks look to have started a bit of a rash of them lately, and Harry was particularly pleased to now suddenly come upon Fred and George Weasley sneaking along a deserted corridor.

The downbeat attitude of the twin brothers shocked him when he first saw it. It had been heart-breaking to find them so different from the fun-loving larrikins that had rescued him from the Dursleys after his first year at school, but slowly they were returning to normal, something Sirius attributed to Ron, of all people.

Seeing the twins suspiciously duck into an out of the way class room, Harry waited a few seconds before flying down to enter the room quietly and hopefully unnoticed. If they were setting up a prank, as they likely were, Harry wanted to see it done.

Suddenly, the door Harry just flew through slammed shut behind him. Turning as quickly as he could, he threw himself upwards towards the relative safety of the rafters.

He was just quick enough to see a red beam of light racing toward him that he recognised as one of the many spells Sirius taught him for duelling, and then everything went black.

A soft magical glow enveloped the massive steel doors in front of a weary Albus Dumbledore.

It had taken days to navigate his way through the labyrinth of the complex to its heart. Blood from numerous small wounds caked his tattered and burnt robes, despite their many layers of protections, and he was limping slightly, but his eyes were just as bright and determined as when he had first set foot under the mountain.

Memories of another, darker time welled unbidden in his mind.

The smell of burning flesh and thick clouds of chemicals managed to seep through his bubblehead charm, despite the power he had infused into it. The battle had been a long and bloody one, costing many lives, including those of the six companions he had started this particular journey with. His dragonhide armour was still mostly intact, but had seen better days.

In front of him stood the last barrier before the target; the steel doors glowed ominously with impressively powerful magic.

Raising his wand in a steady hand, Albus cast the countercharm to the ancient and powerful locking spell that was a stolen relic from a Dark temple thought long lost.

His counter was a new variation on a common unlocking spell - the power required to cast it beyond most living wizards, even though it would only open the doors for a few moments.

It was not however, beyond the power of Albus Dumbledore.

Raising his wand, a much older Albus again cast the modified unlocking charm, causing the glow to fade.

With the final barrier overcome, he pushed the mighty doors open with another flick of his wand. They apart as silently as they had all those years ago, revealing the same office that he had stepped into to challenge the fate of the world.

He had expected to find the vile creature sitting at his desk, waiting for him. There was no way it could not know of the defeat of its army, or of the penetration of its last stronghold by the elite teams of wizards.

Albus strode cautiously into the room, still wary despite the low likelihood of anything in there having changed from his last visit, or his first one for that matter.

The plush office was exactly as it had been in the memory they had viewed prior to starting the mission. Thick red carpet covered the floor, its meandering pattern of dark lines conspiring to make the other end of the small room seem further away than it was. Glass cabinets and

tall bookshelves lined the walls; their contents a staggering array of things valuable and exotic, and not a few hideously Dark.

At the very end of the room was the famed black desk of the most feared man in the world.

Albus could not help himself and stared directly into the cold grey eyes that waited for him.

“Grindelwald,” he said, just as he had all those years ago.

Now, just as then, the painting of the long-dead Dark Wizard snarled its defiance.

Daily Prophet special edition:

Vote of No Confidence for Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge!

Gilderoy Lockhart “ready and willing” to take over.

We at the Daily Prophet applaud the extraordinary decision of the Wizengamot to immediately hold a special session to decide the future of the Ministry after current Minister, Cornelius Fudge, lost a vote of no confidence today....

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“I would be proud to take on this responsibility,” Mr. Lockhart told this reporter. “I can assure the public that, should they choose to honour me this way, there will be sweeping changes to the Ministry...”

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... Former head of the Wizengamot, Albus Dumbledore, was not available for comment.

“Now, now, little Harry, don’t cry. The Dementors like it when you weep.”

The chilling voice penetrated the horrific nightmare he was immersed in – the sound of his mother’s screams intermingling with Hermione’s cries as he burnt Ginny’s face again and again.

He lay in a dingy cell, a quarter the size of the one they just dragged him from, judging by his blind wanderings. The icy coldness of the Dementor’s presence sunk deep into his bones; freezing his blood and making him shake uncontrollably.

The hex removing his sight was starting to wear off, but the dim light coming from the end of the wand of the voice’s owner was not enough for him to make out anything about the man.

“Perhaps you will feel more at home if I show you around. Welcome to the real Azkaban, Mr Potter, not that parody of detention you briefly visited before.”

“You will find the accommodations here much more suitable to somebody of your standing, but let me introduce your neighbours – not that I expect you to be alive long enough to make friends with any of them.”

“In the cell to your left, you have Augustus Rookwood. Amongst his many crimes, he was convicted of spying for the Dark Lord while working in the Department of Mysteries. Not very exciting, I know, but let me assure you – it was the least of his ‘activities’. I happen to personally know he was a fan of using kidnapped Muggles for his unsanctioned experiments. Quite nasty some of those tests were too, and usually fatal. I understand the Dementors sometime make him think he has taken the place of his victims.”

Harry’s head swam. He focussed, trying to fight off the effect of the Dementors and the multiple shocks to his system. Pain from a dozen different places was crushing his thoughts, making it even harder to concentrate. It felt like Dudley and his gang had caught him, but a lot worse.

"In the cell directly opposite yours, is Bellatrix Lestrangle. Torturing Muggles is only a sideline for her - she prefers wizards. Amongst her many famous and notable victims are the parents of one of your classmates – Neville Longbottom. They are now permanent residents of St. Mungos, and will no doubt have already made acquaintances with your friend Ronald Weasley."

"Best you watch out for Bella though, she might be a bit upset at you. You see, her dear husband formerly occupied this cell, but we felt it was a better choice for you, so he has been moved elsewhere. I think that might make Mrs Lestrangle a bit hesitant to befriend you, Harry. After all, she is clearly missing her beloved partner in crime."

An inarticulate roar emerged from the cell where Lestrangle was kept, shocking Harry with its mindless animal ferocity.

"But I've saved the best 'till last," crowed the guard. "In the cell to your right is none other than the notorious Sirius Black. He's rumoured to be second only to the Dark Lord amongst the Death Eaters. Black doesn't talk to the others much – I guess he finds their company too far below him to bother with. He does occasionally say hello to the Minister of Magic though; very polite of him really."

"Sirius is famous for convincing two of his best friends to give him the key to their safety, and then promptly handing it over to his master. The Dark Lord was most interested in finding the happily married couple after they defied him on numerous occasions, although Mister Black's present had some rather unfortunate consequences, as we all know."

"Pay attention, Harry," snapped the voice, a foot nudging Harry as he found himself losing the battle to stay conscious. "This is important. You see the people Black betrayed were none other than James and Lily Potter – your parents."

Seeing the anguished look on Harry's face must have pleased the man, as he let out a chuckle and leaned closer. The putrid stench of his breath was barely noticeable above the decay stink of the cell.

"Oh but that's not all, Harry. Sirius Black was, and remains to this day, your godfather."

The feeling of being suddenly dragged to consciousness made Harry's head spin. As his thoughts cleared, recollection of recent events flooded back, and panic set in.

He had been discovered and stunned, which mean he was likely heading back to Azkaban soon, and so was Sirius, if he was lucky. A visit by the Dementors was more likely.

Still in bird form, he rolled over and stood up, ruffling his feathers in reflex.

Instantly he became aware of two redheaded boys pointing wands at him.

"We know it's you, Harry," said one of the Weasley twins.

"So just change back into a regular, non-feathered type person, if you can," said the other one.

"If you can't change back, because of a spell or something, blink six times quickly," said the first.

"If you don't understand what we are saying, blink fourteen times," said the second one.

"Or try to fly away, in which case we'll stun you again and take you in."

Heart racing at a pace that threatened to overload it, Harry considered his options.

He was locked in a room, on the ground, with two wizards covering him with wands. They had already proven capable of incapacitating him, but hadn't turned him in, yet. Nobody else knew where he was, and he didn't know what his captors wanted. They could want revenge for Ginny's condition, but he really didn't know.

The instinct to escape was overwhelming.

Every fibre of his being screamed to cut and run, to get to Sirius and Remus, and then make a break for it, getting as far away as they could as quickly as possible.

Both Marauders had prepared for the possibility of having to flee with little or no notice. They had plans, a few fall back hideouts, and even some stashes of supplies to help keep ahead of the law, if worse came to worse.

None of it was any good if Harry couldn't get away.

"Doesn't look good," one of them said, after a prolonged silence. "I think maybe we should just hand him in."

The lingering effects of the mail delivery locating spell gave Harry the vague feeling it was Fred, although that could have been his stress-driven imagination.

"Well, the reward money certainly won't go astray," answered George.

He was out of time. With a soft pop, he transformed back into his human form.

"Wicked," both redheads said at the same time, but neither lowered their wands.

"Well guys, you caught me," said Harry, standing up slowly and casually, while covertly looking around the room for possible ways to escape. He tried to sound calm, but inside his panic was reaching a crescendo. "Now what?"

His wand was tucked inside a pocket of his robes, but he had no chance of getting to it without a distraction. The twins answered with their usual horribly distracting, tennis match style of talking.

"Now you tell us how you managed to escape Azkaban-"

"-Why you apparently did so with Sirius Black-"

"-How you became an Animagus-"

“-Why you are here pretending to be a professor’s familiar, and -“

“-Not to mention-”

“Exactly what happened to our little sister?” they both asked together, suddenly looking more dangerous than ever before.

A thousand scenarios ran through Harry’s mind. They obviously felt they had a right to hear first hand the story of what happened to Ginny, and Harry agreed, but there was just too much to risk. If he told them everything, they might choose to disbelieve him and hand him over for the considerable reward.

Even if they promised to keep his presence secret, there was always the chance they would slip up; it’s not as if either boy could be considered reliable.

Nope, he could only see one real chance of gaining control of the situation.

“Okay, but first, can you do something to make this a bit more private?” he asked, looking meaningfully at the door. “I don’t want Filch or anybody else to hear us and come wandering in.”

“I got it,” said George, turning to mumble a spell and flick his wand at the door, causing it to click loudly.

“Can you do a couple of layered silencing charms too?” asked Harry, ready to offer if neither of them knew how.

George nodded and started adding the spells, and Fred automatically turned his head slightly to watch.

The moment Fred’s eyes left Harry, he leapt into action.

Jumping to the side, he pulled his wand and fired off a stunner. Unfortunately the hastily aimed shot was off target, and the red light whistled past Fred’s ear.

Fred yelped loudly and fired his own spell back at Harry, missing by a good two feet and making a desk glow bright green.

George was a bit slower on the uptake, turning back from the door with a look of confusion on his face at seeing Fred throwing himself to the floor.

Harry fired another stunner directly at him, confident one of his opponents was about to be neutralised. It was a shock when the spell slammed into a weak looking *Protego* shield George incredibly managed to get into place.

A sickly orange curse from Fred grazed Harry's lower leg. A sharp pain in his foot made him stumble and fall behind another desk.

Thankful that at least one silencing spell was erected, Harry banished the closest chair at the twins and rolled.

The chair flew across the short distance and slammed into Fred, who was just starting to rise from where he dived after Harry's first attack. It wasn't moving particularly fast, but it hit hard enough to knock the boy over again.

George threw a hex towards Harry, who hastily dragged another chair between him and the incoming hex. The unfortunate seat sagged to become a messy gloop that splashed sluggishly over Harry and smelled like melted sugar.

Harry barely managed to get out of the way of George's second spell with the toffee-like remains of the chair stuck to his hands like glue. The curse zoomed passed and impacted on the desk behind him, causing sickly green bat-shaped things to erupt from under it.

The bats began viciously attacking the desk they came from, so Harry ignored them and rolled behind another desk, gaining a few seconds to scrub the sticky mess off with a cleaning spell.

Through the legs of the furniture between them, he saw George overturning desks before dragging Fred behind them.

A quick flick of Harry's wand welded two overturned desks together to give him better cover. One more fast spell and the barrier was impervious to transfiguration and most other moderate spells, making it good enough for a few minute's protection, at most.

Through the gaps, he could see the twins staying together instead of spreading out to flank him the way Sirius and Remus would usually do.

He was more experience than his two opponents, and usually fought tougher competition in the form of his two mentors, but it was not often he came out on top in a mock two on one match.

Actually, it was never.

“What the bloody hell do you think you are doing, Harry?” yelled one of the twins, from behind his protections. “If we were going to turn you in, don’t you think we would have done it before waking you up?”

Harry’s temptation to bang his head against the desk until it bled was almost too great. He may have just made a right royal mess of things, once again leaping into action before using his brains for more than a moment.

Of course, if he had managed to stun them both quickly, it would have seemed like a brilliant strategy.

“Okay. Well then, just lower your wands, and I’ll explain everything,” suggested Harry as calmly as he could.

“Not bloody likely,” called back George, firing a strangely coloured spell at him.

For a brief second, Harry thought it sounded like a hair growing spell Sirius showed him, but who would use a basically harmless and slow acting spell like that in a real fight?

His initial idea was proven correct however, when long dreadlocks sudden sprouted from the impact site on a far wall.

“Yeah, you’re the nutter who went and took a shot at us to begin with!” added Fred. “And we weren’t even threatening you!”

Harry cursed, using many of the swear words Sirius made sure he now knew, and few Remus didn’t realise he once used within Harry’s hearing.

“Look, I made a mistake, all right?” said Harry, trying to sound reasonable. “Besides, I distinctly recall waking up after you knocked me out first, so don’t start with ‘you shot me first’ crud. You just don’t realise what’s at stake here.”

“I think we have a fair idea,” said George, sarcasm practically dripping from his words. “We either manage to fight our way out of here-”

“-or we get to spend some serious no-quality time sharing a ward with our sister!” finish Fred, punctuating his sentence with another round of spells that slammed into the upturned desks shielding Harry.

An unrelenting wave of angry frustration engulfed Harry. It was all going wrong, again. Not only had he failed to knock out the twins with his surprise attack, he had now turned them against him.

Several desks suddenly started quickly sliding towards Harry from behind, summoned by one or both of the twins to crush him against his own fortifications.

Transforming as he leaped up, the falcon’s powerful wings swept him into the air directly above where he had been. Before they could properly react, Harry transformed again, taking a pop shot while still in midair before changing back again and twisting violently out of the way of any return spells.

Unsurprisingly, the wild attack missed its target, slamming into a chair behind the twins and leaving a long burn mark in its backrest.

George returned fire with a bewildering series of hexes. Harry recognised more hair growing, colour change, and other weird spells. Luckily George’s aim left something to be desired, and all of the shots went wide of the weaving falcon causing more chaos than harm.

Harry dropped behind another strangely transformed desk and changed back just in time to see the door to the room swing open.

In the few seconds while Harry was distracted by George’s onslaught, Fred managed to cast the countercharm to the door locking spell, and was making his escape.

But as the exit opened wide, Harry saw the way out was not clear.

Standing in the way, as if summoned by the disturbance despite the silencing charm, and clutching his faithful familiar to his chest, was Argus Filch, caretaker of Hogwarts.

“What in the name of Merlin’s hairy goat is going on here?” yelled the cantankerous squib angrily.

Harry only hesitated only for a second. The temptation to curse his foul luck was great, but the need to act quickly was greater.

“*Accio Filch!*” he cast, summoning the man and his cat directly into the fleeing Fred.

All three collided with a dull thud, and Harry banished several nearby desks into the still open door. The desks slammed it closed, piling up on front of it in a tangled mess.

Mrs Norris screamed her feline outrage as Filch and Fred toppled to the ground. Leaping free of them, she bolted deeper into the room while wailing like a wounded banshee.

A blue light from George just clipped Harry, before he could dodge completely out of the way after summoning Filch. It left a tingling sensation that quickly became a frustrating itch; annoying, but ignorable.

It suddenly occurred to Harry that neither of the twins had used anything more potent than the Stupefying charm they had already hit him with.

For a moment he was grateful that years of poor defence professors had left the boys ill prepared for a fire fight.

Either that or they were purposely trying to not hurt him.

Some other hexes they had could incapacitate him just as easily as Sirius’s favourite bone breaking curse though, but none were out-and-out designed to seriously injure or incapacitate.

Of course, any advantage in knowing many painful and permanent spells wasn't all that helpful to Harry when he didn't actually want to seriously injure them.

Dashing behind another desk closer to the door, Harry cast and held a *Scourify* spell at the point where he was expecting George to appear.

Anticipating your opponent's moves was something Sirius drilled into him time and time again, and this time it paid off.

While the instant hit or miss of the magically draining *Stupefy* spell was best suited to when he had a clear shot, the easier and longer lasting *Scourify* gave over a full second for George to move into its area of effect, and he did.

The cleaning charm hit George right in the face, making him yell out in pain. It wasn't that bad, but anybody who has ever had soap in their eyes knows exactly how distracting a *Scourify* to the face can be.

Harry noticed Filch fearfully trying to hide behind a chair as Fred jumped to his feet and yelled a mixed bag of spells. Practiced reflexes burst into life and a shield sprang into existence before the hexes could reach their intended target.

The shield reflected the curses back, spraying them all over the room. The red light of a stupefy spell hit Filch as he tried to run from behind his meagre cover, knocking him over several feet from the barricaded door.

Another spell flew back at Fred, who dodged but was unable to get out of the way.

White bubbles began to pour from the redhead's mouth, muffling any further spells he tried to cast with a foaming broth of soap.

Harry was about to finish him off with a stunning spell when George rejoined the fight, eyes now bright red and weeping. A desk came off the barricade and flew at Harry, smashing into his back painfully. Another joined it before he could properly get out of the way, whacking into his arm and shoulder and knocking him down.

As a chair started to fly off the pile towards Harry, he recognised the other danger in George's attack. Not only was he physically punishing Harry with the furniture, he was also clearing the way to the door again.

Rolling under one of the few remaining upright desks for its protection, Harry aimed a spell behind George.

The targeted desk came alive like some four legged parody of a spider. It scuttled towards George, who was caught off guard by the animated furniture.

In a burst of panic, the older boy cast a hex at the desk to stop it. Unfortunately, he chose a tooth growing curse.

The fanged desk was now a real threat as it raced to latch onto his arm and bite down hard. George screamed and began flinging it around wildly, trying to smash it off.

Harry took advantage of the momentary distraction to race towards the door, determined to close it off as an escape route.

He managed to quickly cast a stronger locking charm before George used a tickling hex to force the desk to let go, and then destroyed it with a Reductor curse.

Fred had his wand jammed into his mouth, trying to wash the soap out before it choked him. A thick stream of water poured out, carrying a river of soap bubbles across the debris littered floor of the room.

Running to get behind what meagre cover remained while shielding himself, Harry was momentarily surprised by George throwing something towards him. A patch of the wet floor in front of Harry suddenly turned into what looked like a small swamp.

Trying to veer away, he tripped and was well on his way to landing face first in the muddy water when he managed to again change into his falcon Animagus form.

A beat of his strong wings lifted him up, but then an unnatural gust of wind cast by a soap-spitting Fred blew Harry out of control towards the roof.

Colliding painfully with a rafter, he quickly changed back into a human and grabbed onto the beam with his arms and legs, continuing the motion to swing himself onto a narrow ledge behind the thick upright.

Spells from both boys slammed into the wood as Harry struggled to keep his grip while using the beam for cover.

A particularly powerful synchronised blast from the twins smashed large chips out of his wooden protection, flaying him with jagged edged splinters and knocking him completely off his perch.

Plummeting downwards, Harry had just enough time to change and spread his wings before making a painful re-acquaintance with the ground.

He screamed as his thin bird's wings almost snapped from the impact, but shifted back into human form and rolled away, just as more spells hit the spot where he had fallen.

Through pain blurred eyes, he saw a broken piece of desk right in front of his face. Reacting on instinct, he transfigured it into the first weapon he thought of.

The small, angry bludger tore through the chairs and desks, knocking them aside as it made a beeline for Fred.

A momentary flash of surprise on the boy's face change to one of joy, as he conjured a beater's bat and gave the incoming ball a solid whack.

"That was a silly move, Harry," the Gryffindor beater laughed, as the ball flew back and ricocheted off the floor where Harry was just a second before. "Did you think we'd get distracted by a game of Quidditch or something?"

Harry scrambled away as the bludger rebounded off the wall and headed for George, who also conjured a bat.

“I do believe young Harry may have forgotten that we are the best beaters Hogwarts has seen for a generation,” he said, lining up the bludger.

Harry didn't wait for him to connect, but shattered the undefended flying ball with a Reductor curse, unexpectedly sending exploding debris to violently strike at both boys.

“Shite!” yelled Fred, getting a shield up while George was thrown backwards by the blast.

A banished chair ended Harry's brief reprieve and bashed him sideways.

George recovered from the exploding bludger and joined Fred in continuing to rain various curses down on Harry, putting him completely on the defensive.

Dodging, shielding and summoning desks and chairs into the path of the incoming spells, Harry was forced to retreat behind the dusty old professor's desk. The smashed remains of furniture were making quite a pile around him.

Seeing the way to the door clear, the pair started edging towards it. They continued to lay down a barrage of minor hexes as covering fire while carrying a couple of chairs as shields.

Unable to hit them directly, Harry managed to fell George with a tripping jinx cast just in front of his foot. The boy went flying into the conjured swamp from earlier.

“Aarrggghh,” yelled George, his cry cut off by the muffled splosh of the shallow swamp.

Harry paid for his minor success though. Luckily it was only a hair growing spell clipping him and immediately starting to lengthen his unruly hair.

Fred took the moment of Harry's distraction to grab one of George's flailing arms and pull him out of the swamp while keeping up a shield.

Seeing he wasn't going to get anywhere hitting them directly, Harry fired a powerful exploding hex into the middle of the foul swamp. The resulting wave swept George into his brother, and knocked both of them off their feet.

Harry flipped the large wooden desk over onto its edge and cast several spells to make it impervious.

The fight was taking its toll on him and he didn't know how much longer he was going to be able to keep up this pace. A dozen minor wounds bled copiously and his arms felt like they had been wrenched out of their sockets, several times.

Keeping the desk between him and the twins, who were already throwing hexes at his barrier, Harry pushed it along to get between them and the door, blocking off their escape.

The hair growing hex was acting much faster than a normal one, and started to become a problem. His hair was already down to his shoulders and began to get in his eyes. With the aid of the desk's cover, Harry took a few seconds to cancel the curse and shear off the excess hair with a cutting charm.

The twins' bombardment stopped, so Harry risked taking a peek around the side of his barrier to see what they were doing.

It appeared they had the same idea as him, and were hastily constructing a barricade out of broken chairs and desks.

Exhaustion was beating down on Harry like waves on a beach, and he started to feel strangely light-headed.

Punch-Drunk Sirius had called it.

"Hey guy's," laughed Harry, as he fought off exhaustion and got ready to start again." Do you think the House-elves will murder us for messing up the room?"

"Nah mate, Dobby will fix it all up. He's good like that," answered Fred.

“Dobby!” said Harry surprised. He had not seen the strange little elf since it had arrived with Lucius Malfoy after Harry returned from the Chamber. “Dobby is here? Why?”

A loud crack startled all three into firing the spells they had been preparing.

Unfortunately, Dobby the House-elf had chosen to appear exactly in the middle of the warring parties.

Harry caught a brief glimpse of the excitable elf’s ecstatic expression, then a stunner, a jelly legs jinx, and something that caused large boils to appear on every square inch of exposed flesh, all collided with him at the same time.

There was a shocked silence as the combatants temporarily forgot their battle to gaze in disbelief and shock at the twitching elf.

“Bugger,” said George.

“What did you do, invite the whole school along to watch?” asked Harry.

“Just the ones that don’t sleep regular hours,” answered Fred. “Mind you, Filch was an unexpected bonus.”

The three boys smiled at each other, then realised what they were doing and simultaneously resumed the battle.

Harry found himself overwhelmed by the onslaught, and was quickly reduced to simply holding his strongest shield against their attack.

The twins evidently decided brute force was the only way they were going to overcome Harry, and opened up with everything they had.

“*Reducto!*” cast George.

“*Flagrate!*” cast Fred.

The shock of the blow hadn’t faded before George was at it again. Both used spells Harry had hoped they didn’t know.

“Bombardia!”

“Diffindo!”

The desk that was helping protect Harry became pulverised by the relentless bombardment, and soon the only thing between him and oblivion was his desperately held shield.

“Stupefy!” cast George, switching back to the powerful but draining stunning spell.

“Stupefy!” cast Fred as George’s spell impacted on Harry’s shield.

The constant exertion was catching up with them all. He was suddenly tired, so tired he could barely raise his arms to keep the wand level. Both hands clutched it desperately, forcing it to withstand the combined strength of the two older, pureblood wizards.

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

Each spell was like a physical blow against him, rattling him from his teeth down to his toes as they smashed into the shield. The attack forced him backwards until he was hard up against the piled desks.

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

Both boys were taking turns firing single spells now, stunners. It was tempting to give in, to let the darkness that was creeping into the corners of his visions overtake him, but he grimly held on.

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

Not because he wanted to, but because he had to. To quit now would mean returning to Azkaban for a slow death for him, and probably immediate death by Dementor kiss for Sirius.

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

Harry gritted his teeth and began to push back. His shield, that seconds before was wavering on the verge of collapse, hardened and started to glow slightly. His wand grew hot in his hand, beginning to burn his palm as he forced every iota of his magical strength and will power into it.

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

The pain from his blistering hand started to grow unbearable, but Harry noticed both of the twins struggling to continue shooting non-stop; the pauses between their spells becoming longer and longer. They were both pushing themselves every bit as hard as he was.

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

When Fred fell to his knees, Harry dropped the shield and stuck out at George.

“Expelliarmus!” he yelled, the force of the spell knocking George off his feet.

His wand sailed through the air to land in Harry’s outstretched hand.

Fred’s wand dropped from his fist as he fell back into a sitting position. He no longer had the strength to hold it.

“Sorry, Fred,” said Harry, trying to hold his shaking wand steady.

Blood ran from his damaged palm, drenching his sleeve before dripping onto the floor.

“Sure you are,” spat Fred, as viciously as he could manage.

All traces of humour were gone now; as much collateral damage victims as the ruined desks or disfigured House-elf still twitching on the ground near them.

"I am, really," said Harry, feeling even guiltier at seeing the betrayed look in Fred's eyes, "but I just can't take the risk."

"Stupefy!"

"So, back again, Albus? Have you finally decided to take my advice and make use of my wonderful tools?" said the painting, in a civil tone that somehow still sounded menacing. "Hundreds of lives went into creating those magnificent weapons. It seems a waste they all died for nothing..."

"I will never take your advice, as you well know," answered Dumbledore, limping over to one of the lavish chairs that sat in front of the desk. "The murders you committed to manufacture those monstrosities has ensured they can never be used."

It was always the same chair he sat in – the same one that he had slumped into after proving the Dark Wizard was in fact dead, and had been for months. The corpse of the would-be dictator was no longer rotting behind his desk where it had fallen, but the room somehow still smelt of death.

The painting kept up the illusion after the real man collapsed and died, broken and alone inside his fortress, by using the same device that allowed the living Grindelwald to control his armies and run his empire without leaving the confines of his barracks.

Fortunately, the painting was not able to make outgoing calls, but it was able to respond when one of the inner-circle called in. This major obstacle in controlling the strict hierarchical organisation explained many of the allies' unprecedented victories leading up to the final infiltration of the fortress.

Albus's capture of the crystal ball meant a complete loss of command for the enemy, and without their brilliant and ruthless leader, the armies faltered and fell.

The fortress was resealed with different wards and protections, many borrowed from the originals set by Grindelwald, and abandoned, with Albus vowing to one day find a way to complete the task.

"Still having trouble with your little Voldemort then, Albus?" asked the painting. "All you would have to do is release the wards on a few of the smaller machines, and they would hunt down and eradicate your annoying problem in no time. Why do you persist in allowing pride to keep you from saving lives? Don't you have any compassion left for those you are supposedly protecting?"

Dumbledore was far too old for the barbs and verbal tricks of this incarnation of evil to affect him, but he still chose to reply.

"Do you believe, after all of these years, that your perversions would suddenly tempt me?" he asked. "Do you think I am not fully aware of the level of evil that would be impossible to avoid should I control even one of your devices? I may not be able to destroy you, or your machines, yet, but I will not tempt fate by trying to control anything you have had a hand in creating."

"Then why are you here, old man?" snarled Grindelwald, his voice rising in anger and bitterness. "Come to gloat over your supposed victory over me? You know if you do not destroy me, in a thousand years my machines will be free. Your victory is but a fleeting moment against the eons the Last Reich will reign!"

"Or have you come to retrieve your pretty stone?" it asked, with a sudden change of tone.

Albus's eyes involuntarily flicked to the display case that had been empty until a mere year or so before. Inside, a blood red stone pulsed quietly with the promise of everlasting life.

Nicolas Flamel, the leader of the light during that dark time when Grindelwald sunk the planet into war, agreed to allow Albus to store the stone here, rather than destroy it. While the potential for its abuse

was enormous, the possible benefits, should humanity ever rise above their petty wars and indiscretions, was far greater.

Albus doubted he would ever live long enough to see that day dawn, but he was content to know that the greatest contribution his friend made would live on, and that in this place, in the very heart of an evil that brought death to so many, amongst weapons of enormous destructive potential, a ray of hope dwelled.

He had plans to eventually bring down the wards and destroy the machines of war, and the painting that was somehow innately linked to them, but, for the moment, there was nowhere on the planet more secure for him to leave the stone.

“Not today,” Albus answered, regaining control of his thoughts in preparation for the undoubtedly long mental struggle that was to follow. “Today I have a specific topic for you, one that I know from personal experience that you are intimately acquainted with.”

“Tell me what you know of Horcruxes.”

“You’ve done the right thing,” Remus told a very weary and half healed Harry Potter.

Harry looked down at the stunned and bound forms of his best friend’s brothers and felt differently about it. The unfortunate House-elf and caretaker were unconscious nearby, but he didn’t feel too worried about them. Dobby was back to looking normal, or at least as normal as any House-elf.

“I think they only wanted to talk,” he said, trying to explain his regret. “They could have just handed me in and collected the reward, but they didn’t.”

Sirius paced silently up and down behind the prone bodies, like a caged animal.

"It doesn't matter, Harry," the older Animagus said. "Once they found you out, it was only a matter of time before they let something slip to somebody."

"He is right," agreed Remus. "Don't worry. Removing their memory about you won't hurt them at all."

"It just doesn't feel right," complained Harry. "They are my friends, and they trusted me enough to give me a chance to talk, and now we are going to take something away from them."

"We don't have a choice," said Sirius. "We can't risk it."

A pang of loneliness throbbed in Harry chest. For a moment, he had been looking forward to have some of his old friends back, but Sirius was right.

Nothing was worth the risk of either of them being found out and sent back to Azkaban.

"How are you going to cover up what's happened here?" asked Harry, nodding at the rest of the classroom.

Around him, the remains of desks and chairs littered the floor. Burn marks and various other signs of spell damage peppered the walls. It may not be currently in use, but such devastation was unlikely to go unnoticed for long.

"It's going to be hard to make a believable memory that covers all of this."

Sirius stopped his pacing. "You're kidding right?" he said with a ghost of a smile. "We have a Squib, a House-elf, and two practical jokers, and you can't think of a way to make it all fit? It's like an old joke come to life – A Squib and an Elf go into a bar..."

"Well, look what I found," interrupted Remus.

He lifted a slightly tattered and worn looking square of parchment from one of the twin's robes.

“No. Is that what I think it is?” asked Sirius, sounding awed. “Incredible.”

“It is indeed, Mr Padfoot,” agreed Remus. “I never expected to ever see this again.”

“What is it?” asked Harry, trying to see what it was on the seemingly blank parchment that had the two Marauders in wonder.

“That there is one of the finest magical artefacts ever created,” said Sirius. “Once, it was considered by some very knowledgeable people to be the very pinnacle of magical device manufacture.”

“And no doubt a lot of the reason why your two friends managed to gain the reputation they previously enjoyed,” added Remus.

Then he stopped and looked thoughtful.

“This how they discovered you, Harry,” he said.

Sirius nodded in agreement. “Brilliant deduction, Mr Moony.”

“Here,” said Remus handing the parchment over. “Tap it with your wand and say “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Harry was sceptical, half expecting it to explode or something, but did as told.

Immediately, thin lines raced to fill up the page, covering it in a map that showed every corner of the school, and every person in it. Tiny footprints walked across the page, tracing exactly where everybody was at that precise moment.

“Wow,” said Harry appreciatively.

“Wow?” asked Sirius. “Is that all you can say? Wow? Mr Padfoot fears, Mr Moony, that this uneducated lout fails to recognise true greatness when he sees it.”

“Mr Moony agrees, and blames it on the failings of the younger generation,” answered Remus.

It was then that Harry read the words across the top of the page.

Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers

are proud to present

THE MARAUDER'S MAP

"The Marauders," whispered Harry reverently.

"Ahh. It would seem young Mr Tweety has some inkling of how special an item he is holding, after all," said Sirius proudly. "I told you he had potential."

"Indeed, Mr Padfoot, indeed," agreed Remus. "Unfortunately it complicates the memory we need to create, since we can't let the Weasley's keep it."

"It'll be a darn sight easier to find the Rat if he comes back into the school though," said Sirius, looking at the page in Harry's hand almost hungrily. "Pity we never got to cover the forest and Hogsmeade."

"Guys," interrupted Harry, thinking quickly. "How about letting the twins meet a Marauder?"

Sirius immediately looked dubious, and Remus worried, possibly considering the effect it could have on his professional reputation at the school.

"Even without them knowing about Sirius and me, they could still be really helpful," said Harry quickly, rushing to explain his idea before they decided against it. "They can help get things, like more food and supplies from the kitchens without making the elves think you have an eating disorder, Remus. It won't take much of an excuse to ask them to do it for you, and think of the pranks we can do with a bit more help."

Sirius looked at Remus, and a smile slowly grew on both of their faces.

Ron banged on the door to Hagrid's cabin as hard as he could.

Inside he could hear a soft sobbing, as if the man was crying, but he refused to answer Ron or Hermione's calls.

"Open up, Hagrid, or I'll use my wand and blow your door open," threatened Ron, taking his wand out.

It was a new wand, gifted to him after his release from hospital by his guilt ridden parents. Even though it felt great to have one that matched him perfectly, he couldn't help have some negative feelings from how he came to own it.

"I mean it, Hagrid," shouted Ron, starting to lose patience. "We are not going away until you open up and let us in. I'll give you until three."

Hermione took out her own wand, nodding to Ron to signal she would open the door, probably in a less destructive manner than how he was currently planning.

"One."

They heard a change in the noise from inside, but the door remained shut.

"Two."

There was a scraping on the other side of the door, as if somebody was fumbling with the lock.

"Three--"

Just as Ron started, the door swung open to reveal a bleary eyed and possibly still drunk Rubeus Hagrid.

“Go away,” the giant of a man mumbled. “Don’ wan’ yer ‘ere! Don’ wan’ ‘yer seen visitin’ a criminal.”

“Don’t be silly, Hagrid,” said Hermione, somehow pushing past the huge man. “Let’s go inside and have some tea.”

Ron quickly followed, startled at Hermione’s rather rash seeming actions.

Some time later, the three sat around Hagrid’s table holding bucket sized cups. Neither Ron nor Hermione knew the sobering charm yet. It was not taught at Hogwarts until seventh year, and the lucky recipients kept it a secret from everybody younger.

Hagrid sat swaying slowly in his seat, telling them his woes.

“So they’re gonna kill Buckbeak, without a trial, and probably lock me up again,” wailed Hagrid. “All because I let ‘im attack a student.”

“Hagrid, we were there, and so was Grubby-Plank. We saw what Malfoy did, he deserved what he got,” argued Ron. “It’s not like you were the professor in charge or anything.”

“Obviously that doesn’t make a difference to Malfoy senior,” said Hermione disgustedly. “He will do whatever he can to discredit Professor Dumbledore. Look, Hagrid, we’ll see what we can do. Surely the fact there was so many witnesses must carry some weight for the Headmaster.”

“Maybe,” conceded Hagrid wearily. “But he’s got a bit on his plate at the moment, trying to find a way to prove ‘arry’s innocent an’ all. McGonagall’s gonna go to the Ministry to try and fight it, but they’re all messing ‘bout with this vote thingy - bleeding Lockhart.”

Ron shot Hermione a look, and she took the hint. Carefully taking the fang from her bag, she laid it on the table and began to unwrap it.

“Hagrid, we found something, something we think could be important,” she said, removing the last layer of cloth so that the fang lay uncovered on the table. “Can you tell us what creature this came from?”

“Careful,” she warned, as he clumsily reached out a massive hand. “We are pretty sure it’s deadly. You can see poison still leaking from the end.”

Hagrid withdrew his hand quickly, and squinted his eyes in concentration.

“She’s a right beauty, Hermione. Where’d ya get ‘er?” he said, looking closely at the fang.

“Er, we’d rather not say, yet,” answered Hermione.

Hagrid didn’t even blink, but stretched out his hand again to pick up the fang, turning it carefully to examine every inch of its surface.

“I ain’t ever seen a fang like this one,” he said, his slightly slurred voice full of awe. “It’s a bit like a snake, but no snake’s big enough to grow ‘at monster. It’s not dragon – too fine a grain. Look at the age lines – It’s ‘undreds of years old!”

Suddenly he looked up at the two students.

“Where’d you say you got this then?” he asked, penetrating beetle-black eyes looking far more sober than they had just a moment ago.

Hermione gulped, and Ron realised Hagrid wasn’t quite as dim as people generally thought he was.

“We can’t tell you, Hagrid,” said Ron, “but I think you know what it is, don’t you?”

“It’s a Basilisk fang, aint it?” asked Hagrid, his hands starting to tremble. “You’ve gotten it from the Basilisk that ‘arry killed.”

“Not us,” answered Ron. “Somebody has, but not us.”

“I told ‘em it was me that let the beast out, just like they reckoned,” said Hagrid, putting the fang back down on table and suddenly sounding very tired. “When they said it was ‘arry, I tried telling ‘em they were wrong, I said t’was me, but none of ‘em took me word for it. Laughed and kicked me out on me behind.”

Hermione gasped, her hands shooting up to cover her mouth as Ron felt his stomach twist into a knot.

“Hagrid! How could you do that?” Hermione asked. “How could you risk being convicted? You could have been given the Dementor’s Kiss if they had believed you!”

Ron didn’t have to ask. He knew why Hagrid had done it. If he was ever faced with a similar situation, he could only wish that he would have a tenth of courage the gentle giant displayed in trying to take the blame for Harry.

“I ’ad to, Hermione,” Hagrid slurred tiredly, tears welling in his eyes as his voice started to fade and his head drooped towards the table top. “I couldn’t let ‘em take little ‘arry away without trying sum’in.”

“And Dumbledore wouldn’t let me thump ‘em-”

Then his head fell onto the table with a noisy thump.

As loud snores reverberated through the room, the two astounded teenagers cleaned up and left quietly, only disturbing the sleeping man slightly when Hermione insisted on draping a thick woollen blanket over his shoulders, and impulsively placed a gentle kiss on his enormous hairy cheek.

The hospital wing of Hogwarts was not an interesting place, especially when you weren’t actually hurt anymore.

It was one thing to be allowed to spend the whole day in bed, away from classes and being pampered by the fussy nurse, but it only took a day of it before most were ‘chaffing at the bit’ to get out.

Even for Draco, skiving off classes was only been fun for the first half of a day. Get well cards and the perverse amusements to be had watching the endless cavalcade of students visiting the nurse for any manner of supposed ‘ailments’, grew tiresome very quickly.

Many of those visits took place inside the nurse's private office, behind closed doors. Draco was quite interested in what embarrassing or scandalous secrets might be airing in the room, but not enough to try listening in, lest he be caught and gain a detention.

After being discharged, he had managed to get out of quite a bit of work by insisting on keeping his slightly aching arm in a bandage and sling. It had been good for a lark, and even gained him a bit of sympathy here and there.

Now it was time to take it off, but instead of the visit to the infirmary taking ten minutes for the bumbling woman to declare him fully healed, he found himself waiting while she consoled a plain looking seventh year Ravenclaw girl, probably weeping about some mystery ailment or another.

The opportunity presented while nurse and her charge locked themselves in the office and performed whatever meaningless functions were required in these pathetic situations, was too good to pass up.

On his first night in the hospital, something suspicious happened, with lots of hushed whispering and people sneaking about at odd hours.

When he woke the next morning, there was apparently nothing different in the room, and there weren't any other patients that could have been part of the late-night hustle and bustle.

It wasn't until much later that he realised something was wrong with one of the beds, or rather, he discovered that he hadn't been able to notice it at all. The long boring hours with nothing to do left him wondering about that, but no opportunity to investigate came up.

Concentrating now, he could tell there was a bed in the far corner enclosed in curtains that were trying very hard not to be noticed.

Luckily, Draco was used to things trying to hide themselves while in plain view, and he knew a few tricks to make sure the existence of the mystery bed and its occupant did not slip his mind.

Careful not to stare at it directly, he approached the corner and moved the drapes away without looking at them. As he suspected, behind the heavily charmed curtains, the bed carried a single patient.

What he wasn't expecting was for it to be the Weasley girl, Ginny.

Initially, he thought having the lard-brain weasel-boy and that ugly Mudblood cow back at school would be great fun, but both were proving difficult to torment adequately.

It was infuriating that, with his father rapidly gaining unprecedented authority and prestige, Draco found himself almost powerless to affect the three people in the world he despised the most.

The weasel just laughed whenever Draco tried to taunt him about his time spent in the lunatic asylum or his poverty, and the Mudblood usually just plain ignored him, as if he wasn't worth the effort of responding to!

Potter was just plain missing of course, the coward. Hopefully his naked, mutilated corpse would show up sooner rather than later. That'd give him some ammunition they would have to respond to.

However, things were steadily declining since Potty-head's two sidekicks came back. The Gryffindors were rallying behind the pathetic duo, treating them like heroes or something.

Even the useless 'puffs and stuck-up 'claws were starting to show cheek, after nearly a year of being solidly trodden underfoot in every possible way.

Not helping the situation was how somebody seemed to be getting away with playing an inordinate number of pranks on his house, and Draco in particular. It hadn't taken the boy long to discover professor Snape was blaming the new DADA teacher, Lupin, for the targeting of Slytherin, but the quiet man didn't appear to dislike Draco especially.

Draco realised Snape hated Lupin for some reason he was not at liberty to discuss, but couldn't agree that the fairly straight-laced professor could be responsible for everything that was happening,

even if his pet mutt did seem overly intelligent and was patrolling the school like Filch's scrawny cat.

Now though, Draco had a fourth target for his hatred, one that was not only helpless, but intimately connected to his other three foes.

She lay on her back on the bed, both arms across her chest, as if already dead and ready for a coffin. Her skin was deathly pale against the shock of red hair cascading over the cushion. She appeared to have lost a lot of weight since last being seen at the school, although her face somehow seemed older for it.

Cautiously, he gave her shoulder a little shake, to see if she would wake up. When she didn't respond, he grinned and shook her steadily harder, eventually rocking her head from side to side with his rough pushing, but still not eliciting any reaction.

Draco leaned over her, his heart pounding with tense excitement, and reached out a hand to run down her cold, unresponsive cheek. The faint web-work of scars from Potter's attack was surprisingly as smooth as the unbroken skin.

She is quite pretty, he realised, especially now that she had lost the baby-fat. It was a pity she was a pauper and a blood traitor.

He slowly brought his hand around to encompass her throat, and squeezed gently. Under the slight pressure of his fingers, he could feel her sluggish pulse and the shallow intake and exhale of her breath.

The thrill of her powerlessness was intoxicating.

Almost regretfully, he let go of his grip, and lingeringly drew his hand down the soft folds of her neck until it came to rest on a book that her cold, stiff hands held over her heart.

A tingle of magic ran up his hand as it encountered the tome. He could feel the tendrils of some sort of spell binding it to her chest. Possibly it was something the nurse or headmaster had done to assist in her recovery – hadn't Potter claimed something about a diary at his trial?

He tried to lift the battered book from her lifeless grip. The spell holding it resisted and refused to release its magical binding.

A noise from the nurse's office put an instant stop to his activities. Prior experience told him she was almost done with her visitor and was starting the cleanup of tea cups that usually signalled the end of a 'consultation'.

Draco let go the old book and raced back to his seat, making it just as the nurse left her office to come check on him.

"You are looking a bit peaked, Mr Malfoy," she said, seeing his flushed face and noticing his heavy breathing. "Perhaps you need to spend another week on the potions."

Draco groaned, realising he might have just condemned himself to another visit to the hospital wing.

Well at least now I have something more interesting than the blunderings of that oaf of a grounds keeper to put in my next report to father, he growled inwardly.

Chaos reigned in the main hall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Students ran hither and thither, yelling and squealing as a rain of purple frogs fell from the oddly coloured ceiling onto the assembled breakfast crowd.

The teachers were just beginning to move, some casting charms to protect the students while others began working on the apparently malfunctioning thousand year old roof enchantment.

Minerva McGonagall knew better.

The Weasley Twins were back, and it appeared they were going to make up for lost time.

She fought to suppress a grin. Her recent days had not been filled with much to smile about, but now she felt like laughing aloud, and not just for the amusing prank causing the disturbance.

In a brief second before the amphibian downpour began, she watched the identical Weasley siblings give a secretive nod towards somebody at the staff table.

At that precise moment, Minerva realised she had willingly assisted in placing one of the infamous Marauders into a position of authority within the very institution that originally spawned the rise of their perverted genius.

It was difficult to reconcile the current image of the greying D.A.D.A Professor with the memory of the fun and mischievous loving student of her past, but not impossible.

Especially not now that he had apparently obtained two equally gifted apprentices.

If she had eyes for anything other than the calmly smiling professor, she might have noticed a black dog sitting in a corner watching her intently, the canine equivalent of a grin on its face.

Daily Prophet Late Edition:

Pureblood Registration Act passed by Ministry

Minister Lockhart celebrates first of many promised changes.

Minister of Magic and six time winner of Witch Weekly's most charming smile award, Gilderoy Lockhart, today demonstrated his commitment to strengthening the wizarding world, with the passage of the controversial Pureblood Registration Act.

...

"This legislation simply recognises those families who have shown outstanding commitment to the Wizarding world through multiple generations of dedicated service," stated the Minister. "Anybody can register, just by coming into the Ministry and providing verifiable documentation of your family tree."

...

When questioned about the value of yet another record of wizarding genealogy, Minister Lockhart stated, "Encouraging Witches and Wizards to be proud of their heritage is a noble cause that can only lead to the future betterment of the greater wizarding population."

...

Registration is non-compulsory, but promises many benefits for a small upfront fee.

Hagrid settled the massive teacups on the table in front of his guests before taking his seat. Not one for polite company normally, he was doing his level best to be accommodating.

"Why I asked yeh both 'ere, Ron, and Hermione, was because, well because..."

He took a deep breath before forcing himself to raise his eyes up from his nervously fidgeting hands.

“What I’m tryin’ ta say, is that, well, I’m sorry for the state yeh saw me in the other day,” he finished, in a rush to get it over with. “I shouldn’ ‘ave bin drinkin’ on school grounds, in school time, an’ I should never ‘ave answered the door while I was in that way. T’was right awful of me to subject yeh to that sorta thin’, an’ I ‘ope you’ll forgive me.”

His speech finished, Hagrid grabbed his cup and nervously took a deep draught, sternly keeping his shamed eyes away from the young couple he was sure were feeling at least as embarrassed as he was.

“Get off it, Hagrid,” laughed Ron, completely surprising the grounds keeper. “You don’t reckon I haven’t seen anybody in a drunk before? I got two brothers old enough to legally get sozzled, and dozens of uncles and aunties who like to hit the bottle every now and then. Aunt Muriel could probably give you a right run for your money at any given family get-together.”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Hagrid,” agreed Hermione, reaching out a gentle hand to touch his. Her thin fingers looked like a baby’s against Hagrid’s massive digits. “We understand. It can’t have been an easy year for you either.”

Hagrid breathed a sigh of relief, and took a spotted hanky from one of his many pockets to dab away the tears that recently always seemed to be ready to flow.

“I don’t rightly ‘member it all,” he admitted, after a minute’s awkward silence. “I ‘ope I didn’t say anythin’ too embarrassing, though I would understan’ if yeh felt less of me for it.”

“No, Hagrid,” said Hermione. “Quite the opposite, actually. You told us about trying to take Harry’s place in Azkaban. That was very brave of you.”

Just hearing Harry’s name sent a spike of pain into Hagrid’s chest.

“Do yeh think he’s alright?” he asked, before he could stop himself.

“Definitely,” answered Ron immediately.

The unhesitating conviction in his voice gladdened the massive man’s enormous heart.

“So do I,” agreed Hagrid solemnly. “Right then, enough of that. I asked you to come down for another reason, besides needin’ to apologise. I’ve got somethin’ ‘ere for yeh both.”

He stood up from the table and bustled off to a back room. When he returned, a beautiful white owl was happily perched on his enormous shoulder.

“Hedwig!” cried Hermione excitedly.

The owl gracefully swept off Hagrid’s shoulder and landed lightly on the table in front of Hermione.

“She came back just this mornin’. Don’t know where she’s bin, or why she suddenly came back, but I figure Harry’d want one of yeh two to take care of her,” explained Hagrid. “I’d do it, but I reckon she’d be ‘appier getting’ used regular like, if yeh know what I mean, and I don’ ‘ave much of anybody to sent letters to. Your folks don’ ‘ave an owl, do they, Hermione?”

“That’s very sweet of you, Hagrid,” said Hermione, appearing suddenly excited. “But I have a better idea.”

Hagrid watched with a bit of confusion as the young witch dug around in her bag before coming up with some paper and a quill. She quickly wrote a note and folded it before tying it up and offering it to the owl.

“Hedwig, will you take this Harry for me?” she asked.

The owl obediently held her leg out for the letter to be tied to it.

“You reckon that’ll work?” asked Ron, speaking the words Hagrid was thinking. “None of the other birds ever found him.”

“She’s a very smart girl,” answered Hermione, as she carefully attached the letter. “And if Harry is going to trust anybody, it’ll be her.”

The letter firmly attached, the owl leapt from the table and exited Hagrid's small home through the window he opened.

"I got somethin' for you too, Ron," said Hagrid, reaching into one of his large pockets.

"He's been 'ere with me for a while now. I kept forgettin' to tell yeh, on account of him always hiding away," explained Hagrid, digging around inside his coat. "Mind you, it looks like 'es been frettin' himself half to death. I've bin givin' him tonic every now an' then, but he don't seem to be gettin' much better. Ah, here we go."

Hagrid held out his hands for Ron and Hermione to see what was cradled in them.

"Scabbers!" called Ron happily.

She knew he was close.

The magic was beating strongly now, a slow thumping in her mind demanding release, but unable to find a proper outlet.

The brief letter she came all this way to accept flapped in the breeze of her flying; a testament to her unusually sensitive nature.

She could feel her master getting closer with each beat of her wings, but she couldn't pinpoint him. It was as if he wasn't properly there.

A terrifyingly large bird of prey swept into her view, flying aerobatics above the Quidditch pitch that was normally the domain of clumsy wizards on cumbersome brooms.

Normally a thing to be feared by other birds, this one pulled on her magic like no other creature had ever done.

Nobody except for her master.

The sun was already below the horizon when Ron and Hermione left Hagrid's cabin. They gave no thought to curfew or dinner times, having learned to give up worrying about those parts of their schedule long ago.

"I can't believe Hagrid found Scabbers," said Ron, for the tenth time as they made their way back to the castle. "Don't worry boy," he crooned to the rat. "We'll get you back inside and I'll feed you up proper."

"Ron, do you realise Hagrid doesn't remember seeing the Basilisk fang?" asked Hermione.

"What? Oh, right. Well, so what? We can just take it to him again once Dumbledore returns – this time while he's sober," answered Ron, without stopping his fussing over the rat.

"Well, I was thinking we should probably take it to Professor Lupin, before we see the Headmaster – for a second opinion," explained Hermione.

"Lupin? Yeah all right. Since Hagrid's already said it is one, I guess taking it to Lupin can't do any harm, and it'll give us more to go to Dumbledore with - What's the matter with you, you stupid rat? Stay still — OUCH! He bit me!"

The rat twisted out of Ron's clutching fingers, hit the ground, and scampered away into the grass.

"Scabbers!" called Ron, sounding panicked. "Come back! Here boy, come on. Come back home. Quick, Hermione, you have to help find him. He's not himself."

"Ron," said Hermione, trying to calm him down.

"You don't understand, Hermione," said Ron, raising his wand to make a light. "He's scared and panicking. We have to find him before he gets lost again. Scabbers, here boy."

"Honestly, Ron," said Hermione with a smirk, as she raised her own wand pointedly "Are you a wizard or what?"

Ron looked at his own wand that was casting light, and smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, right, of course. Er, except, um. Do you know that spell?"

Hermione smiled.

"*Accio Scabbers*," she said.

A furry lump flew through the air to land near her feet. It immediately got up and started running again, but Hermione was ready for that too.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" she cried, pointing the wand at the fleeing rodent.

The rat stopped running and fell onto its side, stiff legs pointing out sharply from its body.

"You are so brilliant, Hermione," said Ron, running over to pick up his petrified pet.

Blushing, Hermione smiled, but then frowned when she saw blood leaking freely from Ron's hand.

"I think we should go to the Infirmary and get Madam Pomfrey to take a look at that bite of yours," she said. "It looks like it could use some fixing, and probably a disinfectant too."

Ron frowned and was about to object, but then realised just how painfully the injured digit was starting to throb. Nodding, he jammed the stiff rat into his pocket before trying to wrap a hanky around his damaged finger in an attempt to slow down the bleeding.

"Stupid thing took a nice chunk out," he growled, as Hermione came over to help him tie up the makeshift bandage. "That's gratitude for you."

"Oh, Ronald," said Hermione. "He is probably just terrified about being taken from Hagrid's."

Ron nodded again, choosing to keep any further opinions regarding his less than pleased-to-see-him pet to himself.

Arm in arm, they resumed their walk towards the castle.

Neither noticed the falcon in the distance, or the white owl circling it.

Harry fell from well above where a seeker would normally fly at a speed that would make his broom shake and shudder uncontrollably. He flared his wings and whip-lashed out of the dive in a manoeuvre so violent it would turn even the strongest of brooms into toothpicks.

For the briefest of instances, his extended claws actually skimmed the grass of the Quidditch pitch, before the momentum reversed and he was wrenched upwards.

In the blink of an eye, he was back at normal playing height, rolling into a lazy circle over the well-manicured pitch.

It was fun to pretend to be playing again, even if the loneliness of the empty field left a pang in his heart.

He wanted to believe that one day he would be able to play again properly, with his beloved broom and his fabulous teammates, but in the mean time, he could dream.

Sometimes he came out just to steal the snitch from the unsuspecting Slytherins when they practiced.

Secretly, he was planning to bankrupt Draco's pocket money fund by forcing him to replace the multiple snitches he 'lost' at every session, while at the same time giving the rest of the team serious doubts about the blonde boy's competence as a seeker.

Nobody had yet made a connection between the Falcon's appearance and the loss of the snitches, but Harry often spent some time on the pitch when the team was not out, for appearance sake.

Lingering pain from his battle with the twins limited the amount of time he would be flying, despite the excellent magical healing Remus provided.

Recovering from monthly ordeals forced more than mere competence on the werewolf. With only a little more formal training, he could probably be a profession healer, except for the numerous laws restricting him from holding any such responsible position.

A flash of white made Harry suddenly veer away in reflex before twisting around to see what had come close enough to startle him. Not many birds would dare take to the same airspace as the oversized falcon.

Gliding gracefully in a circle above him, with gentle sweeps of her magnificent wings, Hedwig trailed Harry.

A sunburst of happiness erupted deep in Harry's chest at the sight of his familiar, and he couldn't help but let out a raucous squawk, before slowing down to match the owl's pace.

Somehow, she recognised him, despite his own failures at locating people who were not in human form, but then she always was a very special owl, to Harry anyway.

Together they flew over the grounds of Hogwarts, matching each other's flight as if they could read one another's thoughts; turning, climbing and gliding in perfect synchronisation, and enjoying every moment.

Anybody watching would have marvelled at the beauty of the two very different birds performing an elaborate, almost intimate, aerial dance over the school.

Luckily, nobody did notice, but as the sun finally slipped below the horizon, Harry flew to the top of an apparently abandoned tower near the middle of the school, and landed.

Tucked in behind crumbling masonry was a place where he could sit and think when Remus's quarters became too claustrophobic. A long ago boarded up House-elf tunnel was the only non-aerial entrance to the roof space, making the spot relatively safe for Harry to be human. A dozen broken snitches were piled in a corner, one still flapping its twisted and broken wings weakly.

Switching as he landed, Harry held out his arm for the magnificent white owl to latch onto, her weight catching him by surprise.

“Hello beautiful,” he crooned, setting her down on a low wall and then stroking the feathers of her head gently. “Did you miss me?”

A sharp nip from her beak was the immediate answer, making him laugh at the obvious “Of course I did!” reply.

“I missed you too, Hedwig. I didn’t think I’d ever get to see you again, girl,” he told the owl truthfully.

The Dementors damaged many of his better memories, but over the months since escaping, some were coming back. Unfortunately, Hedwig’s companionship during his tormented time at the hated Dursleys still felt more like a dream than a real memory, but his recalled joy at first being presented the owl was strong enough to produce his thickest Patronus charm mist.

She enjoyed the attention a few moments longer, before abruptly sticking her leg out to display the letter strapped there.

Surprised, Harry slowly untied the note and opened it up.

Please believe we hope you are well. We are at Hogwarts, should you need us for anything. We think they might still be watching us, but we will do whatever we can to help.

Stay safe.

Hermione and Ron.

Draco saw his father and almost rushed to him, only remembering at the last moment to slow down and force his features into the expected public mask of neutrality, as was fitting for somebody of his upbringing.

Lucius would never forgive him if he acted like a child in front of some of his associates.

“Father,” he said, making himself sound emotionless and formal.

“Ah, Draco, excellent,” acknowledged Malfoy senior, giving the barest hint of a smile to show his pleasure at Draco’s demeanour. “You remember Mr. McNair and Mr. Yaxley, of course.”

“Of course,” said Draco, nodding his head in greeting to the two men, who returned the gesture.

“Are you here in response to my letter?” asked Draco, trying hard to sound only politely interested.

Lucius frowned apologetically. “I am sorry, Draco, but I have been rather busy at work and have not caught up with my personal mail. The Minister has me practically running the government for him these days.”

The three men shared small, appreciative laughs at the insider joke. Draco felt a sharp jab of disappointment in his chest at the casual dismissal of his importance, but smiled as well.

“No,” said Lucius, still smiling as his tone and expression became more serious. “We are here to administer justice to the vile beast that attacked you. Apparently, the Headmaster is currently absent, but we hardly need to involve him in what is, after all, now a Ministry matter, do we?”

Lucius paused for a moment, like he was considering his next action carefully before speaking.

“Would you like to bear witness?” he asked, as if bestowing a great honour onto his son.

Draco’s disappointment vanished at the prospect of being included in the execution, but he strained to keep his voice level and relatively emotionless; it was expected of him.

It was all an act. Every public interaction was a careful study in intimidation and manipulation.

He could score valuable points against his father now, turning the man's purpose away from his original intentions and towards a course of action Draco directed. The change of plans would mean allowing Draco a measure of control over him.

It would demonstrate that Draco was important enough to be taken seriously, and was not just an *extra* to be gifted with an invitation to witness one of Lucius's own triumphs.

His father made a mistake not reading Draco's letter before coming to the school, and now he was going to pay for it.

There was no fear that he would be punished for impertinence, after all, this is what Lucius expected of him. It was all for the benefit of the witnesses, who would make note of Draco's power play and increase their respect for him accordingly.

"I suppose it would be the correct thing to do," he said, inclining his head slightly in feigned reluctant acceptance. "However you may wish to investigate what I happen to have discovered in the hospital wing..."

In the deepest, quietest, and most inaccessible potions laboratory of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Severus Snape stared uncomprehendingly at the smoking remains of the ruined potion he had been working on for seven hours straight. His eyes did not see the acrid cloud spewing from the cauldron, or the bubbling mess congealing inside.

His wearied mind was not even thinking of how, at a most vital moment, he squeezed the dropper supplying the volatile ingredient in a manner more befitting Neville Longbottom.

Luckily, the net result of the mistake was not as explosive as most of the Longbottom boy's classroom blunders.

Absently, Severus scratched at the burning itch that just moments ago provided the distraction causing him to fail one critical step in the marathon process.

His brain refused to consider the ramifications of the fact that the startling sensation was centred inside the faded outlines of his Dark Mark.

Harry clutched the note in his beak as he flew through the corridors heading for Remus's quarters.

Normally he mostly stuck to the House-elf tunnels when returning, so that less people noticed he spent every night inside the castle. This time he took advantage of the longer path to return, making sure the letter was clearly visible to make the impression he was delivering it to Remus.

Hedwig was on her way to the rookery for some well earned rest. It wouldn't do for Ron or Hermione to notice her flying around so soon after delivering a letter to Harry; they might get ideas about how close he was. That was another reason for him to be seen too.

Mixed emotions warred inside Harry.

The first stirrings of loneliness occurred when he returned to the castle and was forced to watch his friends and classmates from afar. It got worse when the Weasley twins were Obliviated. The letter from Ron and Hermione was just the latest in a series of stabs into the young boy's heart.

Harry missed his friends, badly.

Yet, there was a way that he might be able to be reunited with them, in a fashion, and that made him strangely excited and worried at the same time.

He couldn't take the risk of revealing himself at Hogwarts, that was for certain. Getting the two away from the school for a meeting was also probably unacceptable, since even the shrieking shack was dangerously close and the two did not have the means to easily travel further afield.

The fact they were being watched pretty much ruled out any sort of a meeting at all, but maybe he could write them.

Precautions would have to be taken, and a code worked out, but there were still ample opportunities for them to correspond safely.

He needed to speak to Sirius and Remus first though. There might be things he hadn't considered, or other ways to go about it that would be safer.

Reaching the door to Remus's quarters, Harry entered through the small window above it. Sirius had his own doggy-door that was large enough for some of the first years to walk through, without ducking. It was spelled against anyone except the Animagus from using it, and was too large for Harry to share anyway. The smaller window was perfect.

Barely slowing down, Harry swept through the usually empty chambers and towards the fortified and hidden werewolf sanctuary. A second, hidden window allowed him entry into the magically expanded and transformed forest room.

Twisting through the branches of the transplanted trees, he lithely landed in front of a replica of the Lodge. Building the cabin for the three to live in was another amusing educational experience Harry fondly remembered. The outer portions of Remus's office provided the illusion of a single man living alone with his familiars, but most of their time was spent here. The cabin was larger inside than the original, although the outside was considerably smaller, and the spells keeping it hidden from prying eyes were even more complex.

Harry opened the door, using the special trick required, and entered the main room of their modest home.

Immediately he felt something was wrong.

It was empty, but it looked like the other's had left in a hurry. A half eaten sandwich lay abandoned on the table, which was covered by the Marauder's map, and a cup of tea was smashed on the floor; a mess Remus would never allow to remain untended for long.

The two Marauders were working on the map, adding areas they did not have access to when originally creating it. Many of the elf's tunnels and some of the teacher's private quarters were no longer blank spaces.

Harry scanned the castle layout, searching for his godfather's name. The magic that made the thing work was well above his understanding, but the usefulness of the map was undeniable.

It didn't take long to find the Animagus and werewolf; the footprints signalling their presence were moving faster than anything else on the parchment.

Padfoot was outdistancing Remus, his canine form having a significant advantage when it came to speed, but Remus was apparently running too.

His heart starting to race, Harry tried to guess where they could be heading in such a hurry. He searched the direction they were going, looking for something that could justify their haste.

Then he saw them, names that he dreaded ever seeing together in one place.

Peter Pettigrew

Ron Weasley

Hermione Granger

Ginny Weasley

Lucius Malfoy

There were other names, but they were nothing to him.

Remus and Sirius were racing towards them, closing quickly, and he didn't know if they were aware of the others, or had eyes only for the traitor.

Snapping into his bird form with an audible crack, Harry tore from the cabin, with only one thing on his mind:

Whatever was going to happen, he had to be there.

Padfoot bolted. Students jumped out of his way, instinctively terrified by the sight of the huge hound racing towards them, an implacable and quite unfriendly expression on its normally placid face.

All traces of the attention loving, mischievous hound were gone, replaced with the vicious intensity inherent in all true descendants of the canine ancestry.

This was not the beast man tamed to accompany it on the hunt - This was the beast that hunted man in its own right; the creature that waged war with him for millennia, and often won.

There was little room for thought in Padfoot's mind; so focussed was it on the goal.

It didn't even realise the blood it could already taste was not that of the prey, but of its own lacerated tongue.

Remus sprinted, truly thankful for the first time that so much of the last several months was spent doing physical exercise.

A mere year ago, he would have slowed to little more than a fast walk by now; poor diet and lack of regular exertion having reduced his fitness to that of a much older man.

Now though, his breath burned in his lungs as he pushed himself in a futile effort to catch the Grim.

Sirius saw Wormtail's name on the map and took off with barely a word. It was as if his human mind was gone, and only Padfoot's hunter brain remained.

The only reason Remus was even close to the racing hound was because of its difficulty getting out of the doors of the rooms, so crazed had it become at the mere sight of the traitor's name.

Not for the first time in his life, Remus wished he could become the wolf, like Padfoot, just to be able get to the Rat first.

Not to save him, no.

The Rat was going to die, one way, or the other. Nothing less would satisfy either of them, or Harry for that matter. Nothing less was deserved for the betrayer of James and sweet Lily.

No, Remus wanted to get there first to make sure it didn't happen too fast.

Ignoring everything around him, Lucius pushed the argumentative school nurse aside and walked directly to the back of the infirmary.

Her dire threats and hollow warnings fell on deaf ears as he moved to the apparently empty corner of the room, and reached out to wrench aside the curtains his son had told him about – the ones with the complex and powerful notice-me-not charms on them.

One of his aids grabbed the healer, roughly restraining her with little care for her objections, but Lucius barely noticed.

Under different circumstances, he may have been impressed with both the spell-work involved in the curtains, and his son's ability to penetrate the fog of obscurity they generated.

Draco was not with them. He sent the boy away, promising to fetch him after this minor business was taken care of.

In reality, he could not afford to let his cunning son see how desperate he was to have the book and the girl under his control. To do so could have possibly given the boy too much knowledge, and knowledge was power.

It wasn't luck both of the Ministry people with him were personally hand chosen for their loyalties, or that his visit was on a day that the Headmaster was absent and the Deputy head was at the Ministry fighting her way through a veritable carnival of bureaucratic red tape.

It was a sign that fate was still smiling upon him.

Behind the charmed curtains, on the bed, lay the Weasley girl, like some fairy tale princess awaiting prince charming to wake her with a kiss.

Clutched in her hands was the diary – the legacy bequeathed to him by his master, Voldemort.

The ramifications of slipping the diary amongst the child's second-hand schoolbooks, so that it would be unleashed on the school, went beyond anything he could ever have imagined.

Never in his wildest dreams could he have guessed how important his one act would become; how it led to the fall of the boy-who-lived, the Minister of Magic, and Albus Dumbledore, while promoting his agenda faster than should ever have been possible.

Lucius reached out with his wand to tap the book, cancelling the spells holding it to the girl's chest. He had an idea of what they were trying to do, and it could not be allowed to succeed.

Behind him, the nurse's outrage was reaching a crescendo, and two new voices entered the argument.

Lucius slid his wand away and gently picked up the black volume, almost reverently taking it into his hands.

He turned to discover two teenagers with their wands drawn and lined up, one directly at his face, and the other covering his two aids, one of which was still holding the protesting school nurse back.

"Get your filthy paws off my sister," snarled Ronald Weasley, looking and sounding far more threatening than any fourteen year old had any right to.

Harry raced through the air, his wings pounding so hard that his previous injuries were screaming at him, their cries a torment of pain.

Fires of agony ran through his veins, scorching human thoughts and ideas from his mind.

Sirius sometimes spoke of becoming the beast, of losing himself in Padfoot's world. It was what kept the man even semi-sane for years in the hell that was Azkaban. Harry was never really able to reach that level of immersion, although he felt he came close to it a few times.

Now, Harry knew exactly what he meant.

It was different from when he fought the Weasley's, when desperation drove him beyond normal endurances. This was deeper, more primal, and more potent.

He didn't follow the path of his mentors, trying to make up their enormous head start through his superior speed. Instead, he headed outside, into the clear air where he could bypass all of the twists and turns of the cluttered school hallways and make the most of his avian form.

The quickest path for him was not to the door of the infirmary, but to the windows.

Even with his advantages though, he knew he would arrive minutes too late.

With the last vestiges of his human concerns, he only hoped the pair retained enough presence of mind to escape Malfoy once they had Wormtail.

Ron looked down his wand at Lucius Malfoy and wished he knew curses that were more violent. It would give him a great deal of satisfaction to tear the face off one of the men most directly

responsible for the worst year of his life. Unfortunately, nothing he knew was even close to being lethal, or even particularly incapacitating, besides Stupefy.

Hermione knew some dangerous curses, but she repeatedly refused to teach him any, agreeing with his healers that delving into the darker side of magic was not a path he should take after his ordeal.

Lucius gathered himself up and tried to intimidate Ron, just like he did all those long months ago during Harry's trial.

"Lower your wand, Mr Weasley, or you will face dire consequences for your actions. Surely you do not want to be returned to continuous care?"

"Stick it, you git," answered Ron, not backing down at all. "I've learned a lot since you bullied me into that piece of crud testimony, and there is no way you are talking your way out of here with my sister."

Lucius appeared taken aback for a moment. He was unused to being addressed in such a manner, especially with the added legitimacy of being a government official.

"Let her go," ordered Hermione, flicking her wand at the man holding Madam Pomfrey.

"Now!" she added, when he didn't immediately move.

A small spray of sparks flickered out the end of her wand, reminding them that even school children are dangerous when armed.

He reluctantly let the nurse go. Madam Pomfrey stepped away from her captor and drew her own wand to stand next to the two children, seemingly at a loss for words, but just as determined.

"Listen, little boy," Lucius growled angrily. "Unless you want to end in the same cell that your friend, Mr Potter, was in, you will lower your wand. Now!"

“That didn’t quite work out the way you planned either, did it, Malfoy?” asked Ron, with a laugh. “Nah, you and your goons can just pack up and push off, because there is nothing you can say that is going to change my mind. So unless you are going to try and get your wand out of that fancy cane of yours before I stun you, you are leaving, without Ginny.”

Ron could tell he was pushing it, but he also knew to be weak was to invite disaster. Lucius played on fear and insecurity to twist everyone’s testimony against Harry. The true evilness of the man was that he could pretend to be doing the right thing while secretly cutting your heart out from behind.

Having Ministry authority might even mean it was legal for Lucius to take Ginny away, but Ron suspected the rude and abrupt manner in which the vile man treated the nurse showed it was not all above board.

“You will leave the diary too,” added Madam Pomfrey, finally finding her voice again and pointing at the book in Malfoy’s hand.

Lucius clutched the familiar looking book tighter.

Just then, the doors of the infirmary opened to admit the massive hound that was Professor Remus’s familiar.

The dog was frothing at the mouth, giving it a truly frightening appearance. Hackles along the length of its back were raised in an obvious sign of aggression, and a low growl emitted from deep in its throat, but it was hard to tell whom the dog was threatening.

One of Lucius’s aids swore at the sight of the Grim, mumbling something about a ‘Death Omen’.

Ron didn’t blame him one bit.

Only the giant spiders encountered in the forest with Harry had ever frightened Ron as much as the sight of the beast. Even Lucius suddenly looked quite pale.

The dog stopped growling for a second and sniffed the air; testing it for something. Then it was running; directly at Ron.

He only had a scant moment to scream before the massive hound slammed into him.

Hermione's first thought at seeing the Grim enter the infirmary was relief. To her, the sudden appearance of the dog meant help, in the form of Professor Lupin, was probably not far away.

Keeping Lucius's two aids under the cover of her wand, she only just had time to register that the dog was not acting anything like its normal lovable self, before the beast jumped onto Ron, driving him to the ground under its bulk.

Her own scream drowned out Ron's as the pair fell, Ron desperately trying to force the animal's snapping jaws away from him.

Hermione turned to help when Lucius and his two aids acted.

An *Expelliarmus* spell tore the wand from her grasp. It sailed through the air to land in the outstretched hand of one of the two aids. Simultaneously, the flash of a red spell from the second man unceremoniously dropped Madam Pomfrey.

Lucius stood, wand drawn, smiling at the completely unequal battle between boy and dog. The Grim was tearing at Ron's leg, drawing blood with each vicious bite.

Ron was screaming and bashing it about the face and head, even forcing the massive jaws away with his bare hands. His wand was nowhere to be seen.

"Help him," cried Hermione.

Lucius just laughed.

"Oh, I think the mutt doesn't need our help," he said. "It appears to be doing just fine by itself."

Hermione went to rush forward when a burst of glittering sparks sprayed between her and Ron.

“Uh uh,” said the man who stunned Madam Pomfrey, wiggling his wand negatively. “You’ll just have to wait your turn.”

For the second time that night, the doors flew open to admit somebody.

Remus Lupin barely slowed down as he came in at a run. He took one look at the situation and threw himself onto his familiar, wrapping both hands around its massive neck.

None of the armed men had a chance to react before Remus hauled Padfoot off the boy, getting a choker hold on the dog.

Hermione rushed over to the blood covered Ron.

“Stop, Padfoot, stop,” said Remus, through exertion clenched teeth. “Calm down. Get a grip. Just settle down. Come on, old friend. You have to stop.”

The three men stood by, woodenly holding their wands at the ready as the man wrestled with the dog. Eventually Remus somehow seemed to get the better of the beast, settling it down without letting go of his grip.

Ron was cursing under his breath and clutching his upper leg with both hands. Blood ran out of the wounds, spilling onto the floor.

Hermione spotted a roll of bandages on a nearby table and wasted no time in immediately strapping Ron’s leg.

“Now that is something you don’t see everyday,” said Lucius, to his cohorts. “A werewolf wrestling a dog - Quite the spectacle, wouldn’t you say?”

Ron gasped and Hermione felt her heart flutter. She knew Professor Lupin had been hiding something, and it was so obvious now what it was that she wondered how she could have missed it before.

"It's moments like this that I am glad I decided to hold off throwing it out of the school as soon as I discovered it's presence," added Lucius, sneering at Remus.

The Grim seemed to be becoming more aware of its surroundings, and started growling at the sight of Lucius Malfoy.

"Careful puppy," warned Lucius. "We already planned on executing one beast for attacking a student today, you could easily be the second, and your master the third. Although, in light of the service you have rendered me in subduing the rash Mr. Weasley, I think I will let you go, for now."

"However, I believe it would be wise for none of this unfortunate incident to ever reach the light of day," he added thoughtfully, raising his wand.

"Obliviate!"

He neared the window at an alarming rate. Misjudging the slight opening meant a painful crash, and possibly even a fatal fall afterwards.

The Falcon tucked his wings in close and, with a confidence bordering on suicidal, dove through, sweeping upwards the instant he was beyond the frame.

Directly before him, Lucius Malfoy was bringing his wand down at somebody kneeling in front of him.

Harry didn't hesitate.

Razor sharp claws extended and sunk into the raised arm with a force that normally broke the spines of large birds, just as the spell was cast.

"Obliviate!"

The arm, twisted at an odd angle by Harry's collision, snapped with an audible crack, the spell fired off into the wall. Lucius screamed in pain as Harry's momentum knocked him off his feet.

Harry, claws still embedded deeply into the man's flesh, fell with him to crash into the floor. Lucius's tore him free and tossed him away to slam into the leg of a bed. Blinding spots of light appeared in Harry's eyesight when his head made painful contact with the metal, stunning him for a moment.

Pandemonium erupted around them as spells began flying.

Remus and Sirius were fighting the two Aurors, shielding and counter attacking faster than Harry had ever seen before. Behind them, Harry could see Ron trying to protect Hermione with his own body, both lying on the floor with their hands over their heads to protect themselves from flying glass and other debris from the firefight.

Lucius cradled the broken arm against his chest, fumbling with his off hand to cast a healing spell Harry recognised would splint and bind the damaged limb, once it worked.

Harry crawled out from under the bed, internally berating himself for not bringing the extra wand Remus obtained, with considerable difficulty, so they could practice duelling. It was a lousy match for any of them, allowing only the weakest of spells, which is why neither Harry nor Sirius bothered to carry it around when it wasn't their turn with his grandfather's wand. Right now though, it would have made a difference.

Looking around for a weapon, he spied an ancient looking bedpan on a side table.

Suddenly there was a change in the sound of the fighting. Harry caught a glimpse of one of the Auror's tumbling to the ground after being flung into the air by a well-placed spell from Sirius. A few seconds later, the second Auror joined the first, as the attacks from the two Marauders overcame the man.

The silence was deafening.

“Harry!” called Sirius. “Harry, where are you?”

Harry transformed and stood up, just as Lucius, arm now wrapped in bandages, jumped to his feet on the other side of the bed, his wand held shakily in his off hand pointing at Sirius and Remus.

Both of the wizards foolishly lowered their wands after besting the two Aurors, leaving them at Lucius’s mercy for precious seconds, but Harry was behind him.

The bedpan connected with a satisfying crunch, downing the Malfoy patriarch before he had a chance to even begin a spell.

“Harry,” yelled Sirius again, running over to where Harry stood and grabbing him in a hug.

“Harry?”

It was Ron, leaning heavily on Hermione, his face a mixture of pain and hope. Hermione’s face was unreadable. She stayed at Ron’s side, waiting wordlessly as Harry disengaged himself from Sirius to walk over to his friends, while Remus cast spells to immobilise Malfoy and the Aurors by wrapping them in ropes and petrifying them. A groan of pain escaped Lucius when his damaged arm was suddenly trapped against his side.

“Hello Ron, Hermione,” he said, his voice shaking slightly. “Did you miss me?”

“A bit,” answered Ron feigning casualness, but unable to hide the smile. “You?”

“Nah,” answered Harry negligently. “Been here all along, you see?”

He took a step forward, unable to holdback any longer, but was met with Ron’s wand pointed between his eyes. Hermione looked about ready to burst with questions, but she held her mouth shut with a visible effort, letting Ron speak first.

“You alright then, Harry?” asked Ron, a worried expression replacing the smile.

“Been better,” answered Harry with understanding. “I’m still all here, if that’s what you mean.” He tapped the side of his head with a finger as he spoke.

“What’s their story?” asked Ron, nodding his head towards Remus and Sirius.

“Sirius is my godfather,” explained Harry. “He kept me alive and helped me escape. Remus and him were close friends of my parents.”

“Why did he try to gnaw my leg off?”

“Sorry about that,” said Sirius. “But you have someone very important to me in your pocket.”

Ron looked confused for second before understanding show on his face, and then more confusion.

“Scabbers? You want Scabbers? What the bloody hell for? What’s going on, Harry?”

“Ron, Scabbers is not a rat. He is a wizard called Peter Pettigrew. He betrayed my parents and framed Sirius for murder,” answered Harry, his words sounding ridiculous even to himself.

Hermione couldn’t hold herself quite any longer.

“Harry, you have to tell us where you have been and what is going on. Why do you think Scabbers is an Animagus, and how did you become one -”

“Hermione, stop!” interrupted Harry, smiling at the rush of feeling he had for the unquenchable questioning nature of his friend. “I’ll answer all of your questions, later, but right now, we need the rat.”

He looked into Ron’s eyes and dropped the smile. “Ron. Give me Scabbers.”

Ron looked at Remus, a man he knew only as Professor Lupin, a teacher meant to be trusted, but now revealed as a Dark creature.

Remus was standing quietly to the side, near where Madam Pomfrey was still prone on the floor. The werewolf gave a small nod.

"It's all true," Remus said, sounding like the professor he was in class.

Then Ron looked at Sirius Black, an escaped convict feared throughout the wizarding world as a merciless killer in league with the Darkest of magic. Sirius looked eager and impatient.

"I've waited twelve years for this, boy," he said.

Finally, Ron turned to look at Hermione. She was biting her lip with indecision. "Maybe we should wake up Madam Pomfrey first," she suggested.

Sirius let out a slow growl of frustration and impatience.

"Miss Granger, if we wake up Madam Pomfrey, she will likely run screaming from the room after one glance at Sirius," Remus explained. "It's better she remain unknowing and out of the way, for the moment."

Hermione opened her mouth to object, but closed it again quickly.

Ron returned his gaze to Harry.

"Please?" Harry asked, holding out his hand.

That was apparently more than enough.

Not pausing for a second more, Ron reached into his tattered pocket and withdrew the stiff form of Scabbers.

"Is he dead?" asked Harry, as Ron placed the unmoving body into his hand.

"Nah, we had to petrify him because he kept trying to escape. Guess I know why now, eh?" said Ron, smiling.

And just like that, somehow everything was suddenly better.

Then Harry was hugging his two best friends, tears running freely down all of their faces as they mumbled apologies and forgiveness. It took them a minute to realise Sirius was talking to them.

“The Rat, Harry. Give me the Rat,” said Sirius impatiently, interrupting them.

Harry let go of his friends and stood back, but then hesitated.

“How are we going to do this?” he asked Sirius.

Peter knew he was at the end of the line.

Although magically petrified, he heard much that had gone on around him, and now his worst nightmare was coming to life.

Pain gripped his body as he was forced from the rat shape and back into the loathsome, almost forgotten, human form. The petrification disappeared too, but terror held Peter just as still. Standing around him were the people he most feared, aside from the Dark Lord.

Remus Lupin, the werewolf Peter had always been mortally afraid of, held his wand unwaveringly at Peter. A look of anger on his aged features banishing any hope Peter may have held for some form of friendship from the most sensible of the Marauders.

Sirius Black, his fist gripping and releasing almost compulsively on his wand. Peter saw madness in those eyes and knew the Grim had never been more a part of his former friend than right at that moment.

Harry Potter, looking like a young avatar of the man Peter betrayed, James Potter, but infinitely more serious and deadly.

“Stand up,” ordered Sirius.

Peter whimpered at the sudden command. “Please-”

A kick crashed into his side, almost cracking a rib with its brutality.

“I said stand up,” repeated Sirius, in an awful voice.

Peter crawled shakily onto his hands and knees, his whimpers of fear and pain coming unbidden. With a dreadful effort, he rose to his feet, but couldn't raise his eyes to look at any of the people he knew where about to end his miserable existence.

"Well, Peter. Do you have anything to say before you finally pay the price for your betrayal?" asked Sirius.

The words caused his control to break. He burst into tears and looked desperately around the room and into the face of each of his captors, finally stopping on the man he had betrayed even more than James Potter.

"Sirius, Sirius, what could I have done? The Dark Lord...you have no idea...he has weapons you can't imagine ...I was scared, Sirius, I was never brave like you and Remus and James. I never meant it to happen...He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named forced me —"

A threatening growl of anger from Remus cut off his pleas. He fell to his knees in front of Sirius, wordlessly begging for his life, but there was no mercy to be found in those cold black eyes.

A soft voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Harry?"

It was the girl – the clever young witch who was a constant companion of Harry and Ron for their first two Hogwarts years. "Harry, what are you doing?" she asked.

Peter turned to look at the youngest of the three people who were to be his judge, jury and executioners. The startling green eyes still had a hard look in them, but there was a glimmer of something else, something James developed fully after winning his green-eyed witch.

Compassion.

Desperate hope blossomed in Peter's chest.

"He killed my parents, Hermione," answered the young Potter, his voice cracking with emotion. "He was their friend, and he betrayed them. He framed Sirius and left him to rot in jail."

"But, Harry, you can't just murder him," she objected.

"He won't," said Sirius. "I will."

"No!" said Harry, looking sickened but resolute. "If you are going to do this, then I am too."

"Harry, you shouldn't be part of this," said Remus. "It's our responsibility-"

"They were my parents!" said Harry, raising his voice in anger. "I spent ten years living in a cupboard because of this coward. It's all his fault!"

"No, it's not," said Ron. "It's you-know-who's fault, Harry. He is the one who murdered your parents-"

"Only because Pettigrew told him where to find them. They were safe in hiding until he betrayed them."

"It doesn't matter," said Ron, the girl beside him nodding in agreement. "Scabbers, or Peter, or whatever his name is, was just another one of you-know-who's servants. He probably deserves to die, but do you have the right to kill him? Do you really want to become the murderer those gits made you out to be, mate?"

"I bloody well do," growled Sirius.

"Professor Lupin?" It was the girl, Hermione, again. "Are you going to let them do this?"

Remus looked at Hermione, his resolution visibly wavering in the face of her question.

"Sirius," said Remus, a hint of doubt entering his voice. "Maybe-"

"No!" yelled Sirius angrily. "I went to hell because of this gutless heap of dung. James and Lilly are dead, and you've lived like a tramp because we trusted this coward. He destroyed our lives, Harry's too, and now I'm going to get my revenge."

Sirius raised his wand, and Peter curled into a ball with his arms covering his head, waiting for the flash of green light he knew was coming.

"You could be free," said Remus loudly.

Peter looked out from under his arms. Sirius stopped, wand raised above his head.

"Think about it, Sirius," continued Remus. "If we turn Pettigrew in, you'll be cleared. You could be free, and never have to run again."

"Turn him in? To who? To Malfoy over there?" yelled Sirius, nodding towards the petrified and bound men. "Do you really think I'd get a fair trial with him in charge? And even if I do, Harry will still be wanted."

There was a bustling as Hermione stepped forward, digging around in her bag for a moment before pulling out a long cloth wrapped object.

"The Chamber of Secrets is open," she said, unwrapping the object. "Professor Snape found a way in, and we have this to prove Harry's story. It should be enough to get another trial for Harry, one where the truth will come out."

In her hands, she held a very long tooth. Harry looked stunned

"It's a fang, from the Basilisk," explained Hermione, to a confused looking Remus. "This will go a long way to proving Lockhart lied."

Realisation showed on Remus's face, and more hope crept into Peter's heart; he might not die lying on the floor of the hospital wing.

"She's right, Sirius," said Remus. "It could be enough to get another trial, and if we get Wormtail to prove you were innocent first, it could help call into question Harry's guilty verdict too, simply by association."

“We need Dumbledore,” said Ron. “He’ll know what to do.”

Sirius’s expression turned nasty again, Harry’s face took on a look of distaste, and Remus looked thoughtful.

“Dumbledore,” spat Sirius. “He didn’t even try to help me, and a fat load of good his help did Harry.”

“Better him than Malfoy,” said Harry. “Look, you know I don’t trust him either, but maybe we can dump Peter off and get away. Go into hiding until they find you innocent or something?”

Peter slowly uncurled, removing his arms from around his head to look at Sirius.

Conflict showed on the man’s face. He clearly wanted to finish the curse, but was hesitating, no longer completely sure of what to do.

“Bugger it. It’ll work just as well with only the body,” said Sirius, preparing to cast. “He doesn’t need to be alive.”

“Wait,” squeaked Peter, desperately searching for anything to help his cause. “I can testify – against Malfoy! He was there, at the meetings. I saw him, I can prove he wasn’t under the Imperius Curse.”

A strangled groan came from where Malfoy lay. He was fighting the petrification and pain.

The lights of the room dimmed for a split second.

Slowly, with obvious distaste and resignation, Sirius lowered his wand.

Peter shivered as a cold feeling rolled over him like the wave of relief his narrow escape from death generated. His testimony against Malfoy in Harry’s favour, together with the other blackmail information he held as a last resort, might even be enough to keep him out of deep Azkaban, although he knew there was no freedom in his future anytime soon.

Weakness flooded his arms and legs, making him glad he was not standing.

The lights of the room flickered again, momentarily plunging the room into darkness, and another cold breeze blew over Peter, chilling him in a way that only terror normally made him feel.

“Harry?”

Peter looked up to see Harry and Sirius were both shaking, expressions of fear clear on their faces.

“What’s going on?” asked Ron.

Harry’s whisper was barely audible, but it drove Peter’s fear back to the dizzying heights of just moments before.

“Dementors,” whispered Harry.

Harry felt the numbing chill of the Dementors and the corresponding rush of panic that invariably accompanied it since he had escape from Azkaban prison.

Next to him, Sirius looked lost.

“What’s happening?” asked Hermione. “The Dementors are meant to stay outside of the school.”

“Close the doors,” said Ron, an edge of fear in his voice.

Remus immediately flicked his wand towards the heavy wooden doors of the infirmary, slamming them shut with a loud, echoing boom that made everybody jump.

In the split second that Remus took his wand away, and with Sirius no longer concentrating, Peter made his bid for freedom.

He changed into his rat form and scrambled under the nearest bed.

Everybody shouted and Sirius fired off a spell that missed but tore a large chunk out of the floor. Remus threw his own spell at the bed, pushing it violently out of the way, but Peter was already out from under it and transforming back into a person.

“*Confringo!*” the traitor shouted, casting the same spell he had used before to blow up a street and escape from Sirius.

An explosion tore through the room, blasting, beds, chairs, and stone in all directions.

A large chunk of something slammed into Harry’s chest, knocking him to the ground. He caught sight of Remus flying through the air and Sirius transforming, but his mind was refusing to cooperate with the horrid Dementor’s effect closing in on it.

The yelling and voices around him meant nothing. They were incomprehensible, far-off sounds, echoing through the empty chamber of his mind caused by the terrifying aura.

It was strong, very strong; too strong.

Months away from the regular close visits may have lowered his resistance, but Harry knew this was no ordinary Dementor fly-by. It was almost as powerful as when two of the creatures entered the cell to deliver his meals, and it was getting stronger.

He could feel the direction it was coming from. Waves of it flooded the room from beyond the closed doors; the strength of each subsequent swell growing in power and duration with every passing second.

Distantly, other sounds were starting to grow louder: screams.

The screams of his mother as she pleaded for his life; the insane screeches of the Azkaban inmates locked in cells just like his; the cries of Hermione as he was dragged from the court.

A cacophony of terror rose in his mind, drowning his thoughts in a tidal wave of primal fear induced sound.

But, his mum was already dead – giving her life in the ultimate expression of love to protect him; he was well away from Azkaban – its fear-maddened inmates a world away from the school he loved; and Hermione was in the room with him – she hugged him mere minutes ago and cried in happiness to have him back.

Harry fought.

He refused to let the horrors of his past overwhelm him, as they had so many times before. Not now, not after all he had been through. Forcing his eyes open, he struggled to roll over and get his hands underneath him. The fear was crushing him under its emotional weight, but he clamped his thoughts down and concentrated on the here and now.

Giving in was not an option.

Looking around, Harry saw Remus was down, obviously unconscious. Ron was nowhere to be seen, but Hermione was kneeling on the floor

nearby, fighting her own battle of resistance. Her face was cradled in her hands, and Harry could see she was sobbing uncontrollably.

A crashing from the other side of the room signalled where Padfoot was still chasing Wormtail; his massive form shoving beds and tables out of the way, as he relentlessly pursued his prey, barking and snarling in frustration and anger.

Harry knew Sirius was beyond human reasoning; Padfoot was in control. There was no way Sirius could still be functioning with the Dementors this close.

The door suddenly let out a thunderous boom, as if something had crashed into it, and then once again burst open.

Over a dozen of the foul beasts entered, gliding silently into the room like horrid corporeal ghosts. They were in constantly motion, their cloaks billowing on non-existent winds, as they weaved their way through the room to form a large circle around Harry and the others.

Remus moaned pitifully and raised a hand to cover his face, but did not wake up. Hermione sobbed louder, falling down completely before rolling into a foetal ball, and Harry had to struggle even harder to stay conscious.

Suddenly the mind numbing chill receded, as if the monsters were purposely withdrawing their paralysing fear.

Harry drew in a long, ragged breath as he felt more control return to him.

Through the open infirmary door, surrounded by even more Dementors, Minister of Magic, Gilderoy Lockhart, strode purposely into the room.

He no longer looked like the arrogant, incompetent braggart who once pretended to teach Harry Defence against the Dark Arts. Instead, he looked confident and powerful, although still supremely arrogant, just in a different way.

Gilderoy paid little attention to Harry and his friends, but walked calmly over to the bound and unconscious forms of the Auror's Lucius brought with him; a smirk curled the corner of his mouth. The Dementors parted soundlessly before him as he walked.

He gave one of the downed men an absent nudge with his foot.

"Not quite the elite, pure-blood warriors you promised me, Lucius, eh?" he sighed, sounding very disappointed.

There was a strangely unnerving quality to his voice that Harry recognised, but couldn't place. It was not Gilderoy's normal way of speaking, but there was something in it Harry knew somebody else had, although he couldn't recall exactly who it was the cold tone reminded him of.

"My Lord!" moaned Lucius weakly, not sounding completely conscious.

The words triggered a memory in Harry's mind, and the pieces fell into place. In a blazing flash of insight he knew how Lockhart had become so powerful, and what truly happened to the memory of Tom Riddle once locked in the old diary.

"Riddle," said Harry.

Behind him, Hermione gasped.

A look of surprise, and then almost pleasure, crossed the smirking man's face as he swung back to look intently at Harry.

"Well done, Harry," he said, almost proudly. "Nobody else made the connection, well, besides Lucius here, who was so incredibly eager to aid me in my quest to rule the wizarding world."

"How?" asked Harry, almost yelling, his anger helping to overcome the despair induced by the Dementors. "I destroyed you. I burnt you out of Ginny, just like I did to Quirell!"

Gilderoy's expression suddenly twisted, as if in pain, or hatred.

"Oh yes, you expelled me from the Weasley girl, but you could not destroy me, no. I fled from her, but I did not return to the Diary to spend another forty years with nothing but my own thoughts to occupy me.

"I was little more than a spectre, a mere ghost of a memory, but I was still strong enough to leave the Chamber; retreating so that I could find a way to regain my strength. Luckily I did not have to go far to find the damaged shell of the man you left behind."

"You possessed Lockhart - just like you tried to do to Ginny," yelled Harry, struggling to stay angry enough to keep the effects of the Dementors off.

Every little bit seemed to help.

"Not quite. In my, *weakened*, state, I was only able to take refuge inside his body. Enough of his soul and mind remained that I was not immediately able to control him. Otherwise, I assure you, nobody else would have left the Chamber."

"However, I was soon able to *merge* with him, awakening his lost memories and making them my own. A lifetime of experience and the genius of the heir of Slytherin combined into one, new entity."

Harry struggled to stand. Riddle-Hart drew his wand and pointed it at a spot directly between Harry's eyes.

"Why did you come back? Have you come all this way just to try and finish me again?" Harry asked.

Riddle-Hart laughed, a cold, cruel laugh, devoid of any true humour.

"Finding you here is really just a bonus, Harry. I came to retrieve the Diary, and to dispose of the Weasley girl. Lucius summoned me when he discovered her here, since he was already searching the country for her on my behalf. It was rather fortunate he stumbled across Dumbledore's little hiding place while the so called 'greatest wizard of his time' was not in residence, don't you think?"

For the first time, Harry realised one of the beds was occupied. Lying, unmoving and deathly pale, on a bed that had been moved but not overturned, was Ginny.

“Why, Tom? Why can’t you just leave her alone? Hasn’t her family suffered enough because of you?”

“Suffered? My dear boy, I will be doing them a favour by ceasing this hollow existence of hers.”

Harry snorted a bitter laugh.

“No matter, Harry. It won’t be a concern of yours for much longer,” Riddle-Hart said, raising his wand.

“Expelliarmus!” cried Ron, standing up shakily from behind the trolley where he landed after Wormtail’s attack.

The spell caught Riddle-Hart by surprise, ripping the wand from his hand. It tumbled through the air, end-over-end, heading towards Harry. Acting more on instinct than thought, Harry’s hand flashed out and expertly snagged the spinning stick from the air.

A warm, tingling thrill ran through his hand, and a burst of golden sparks spewed from the end of the familiar wand, in greeting.

“My wand,” said Harry in wonder.

The warmth spread from his hand, racing through his body and igniting the fire of hope.

Ron fired a stunning spell, but the man jumped aside and yelled at the Dementors who were still soundlessly circling.

“Destroy them,” he shouted, pointing at Harry.

The Dementors immediately flew straight towards them, but Harry knew what to do.

“Expecto Patronum!” he cast, the wonder and joy at once again holding his beloved holly wand still fresh in his mind.

A huge, glowing, silver shape fell from the end of the wand and onto the floor, flooding Harry with even more feelings of happiness as it coalesced into a solid shape.

A magnificent stag stood between the Dementors and Harry, protecting him from their effects like a shield. Warmth practically radiated from the glowing animal, bathing him in its eerie glow.

"Prongs," whispered Harry.

It was the first time he had ever managed to get a corporeal form from the Patronus charm. The fact it had taken on the Animagus form of his father caused yet more wonder to swell in Harry's chest.

"Brilliant," said Ron groggily, blood running down his face from a cut somewhere on his head.

"Oh my," whispered Hermione to herself. "It's beautiful."

The stag turned its head to gaze at Harry with ghostly silver eyes, then swung back and launched itself at the Dementors who had crashed to a halt mere feet from it.

The first Dementor was thrown aside by an almost negligent toss of the great Stag's horns, and the next was trampled under implacable, silent feet. The stage swung its head again and two more Dementors were knocked away as if they were nothing more than empty cloaks.

Within seconds, the glowing Stag drove all the Dementors from the room. They fled its unstoppable charges, hastily rushing away at the Patronus's urgings.

A sickly green spell flared at Harry from the other side of the room, narrowly missing him to smash into the wall behind.

Harry yelled and threw himself to the ground, twisting to try and return fire. He saw Ron grab Hermione and duck behind a hospital bed, flipping it over onto its side for more protection.

"You will not escape this time, Mr. Potter," yelled Riddle-Hart, firing more spells as he walked towards them. "I thought deep Azkaban

would be enough to get rid of you, but I am glad I will get to have the pleasure of killing you myself.”

Harry raised his shield in time to catch another barrage of spells. It bent and buckled, heating up and glowing ominously before finally disappearing in a flash of light.

Then suddenly Sirius was there, standing over him like a mythical guardian angel come to life, except the twisted expression of anger made him appear more demon than angel.

“I don’t think so,” growled the Animagus.

Riddle-Hart took an involuntary step backwards, surprise and shock replacing the condescending expression of moments ago.

“Black,” he said, trying to force on a look of annoyance. “What an unexpected surprise, although, I should have expected you to be near young Harry, shouldn’t I?”

Sirius didn’t answer, but raised his wand in readiness. Harry scrambled to get to his feet and raised his wand too. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ron and Hermione both getting their wands ready, although they moved closer to where Remus was lying.

Riddle-Hart looked at them all and laughed with contempt.

“Do you really think you can stop me? I am immortal. Even if you strike down this body, I will live on. What will you do if the next person I possess is one of you? And if you don’t kill me, do you really think you’ll get away with attacking the Minister of Magic?”

“You will not be Minister for much longer,” said a familiar voice wearily from the still open door. “Not once the truth behind your existence becomes widely known.”

They all turned to see Albus Dumbledore enter the infirmary. Harry automatically moved his wand to point at him, while Sirius kept his pointed at Riddle-Hart

“Dumbledore!” spat Riddle-Hart with pure hatred. “You don’t look too well, *Headmaster*. Are you sure you are up to a fight?”

Harry looked closely at the Headmaster. His clothes were burned and torn, and in several places, Harry was sure they were caked in blood. Dumbledore’s beard was singed and blackened, and a large bruise covered one whole side of the old man’s face.

Riddle-Hart was right. Dumbledore didn’t look like he would survive a battle.

“Hello, Harry,” said the Headmaster, smiling at Harry. “It’s good to see you again, although I wish the circumstances were different.”

Harry open his mouth, but couldn’t speak. What could he say? He was trapped.

“Headmaster!” called Hermione worriedly, moving to take a step closer, but again being held back by Ron. She must have also noticed Dumbledore’s state. “Are you all right, sir?”

Dumbledore brushed aside her question and looked directly at Harry.

“Harry,” he said calmly. “Move aside.”

Confused, Harry almost took a step, but then realised what the headmaster meant. He wanted Harry to move out from between Dumbledore and Sirius.

“No,” said Harry. “Sirius is innocent, and we can prove it. Peter Pettigrew was the secret keeper.”

Dumbledore looked surprised and saddened. He obviously didn’t believe Harry.

“Then he has nothing to fear from me,” said Dumbledore.

Riddle-Hart laughed again.

“Tell me, Black. What is it going to be? Going to put your trust in the man that allowed you and your godson to be sent to prison?”

Harry could feel Sirius move nervously beside him.

“Headmaster, Lockhart is possessed by the memory of Tom Riddle-” he started explaining.

“I know, Harry,” said Dumbledore, cutting him off.

“Enough!” barked Riddle-Hart. “I am the Minister of Magic-”

Sirius snapped.

A barrage of his favourite bone-breaker curses flew straight at Riddle-Hart’s chest.

Riddle easily blocked it and fired a spell back at Sirius’s feet.

Dumbledore whirled his wand and magic flared from its end filling the room with a bright light as it swept over them all.

Harry conjured a shield to protect his godfather’s flank. Dumbledore’s spell splashed against it, just as Riddle-Hart’s explosion tore the ground out from under his feet, throwing him across the room to land near the unconscious Madam Pomfrey and knocking the wand from his hand.

Sirius was also tossed to the side by the explosion, but away from Harry.

Immediately Riddle launched an attack at Dumbledore, who was already counter attacking even before the first spell was airborne.

Sirius rolled to his feet and fired into the fray, although Harry wasn’t entirely sure of his target.

Behind Sirius, Harry saw Hermione trying to shield the bed with Ginny on it, while Ron dragged Remus towards them, possibly intending on combining their efforts at protection.

Spells and explosions filled the room as the three-way battle escalated. Debris rained down as blocked spells rebounded or deflected in all directions to vent their energy against the room.

It was chaos.

Harry saw a bed curtain tear from its hangings to wrap tightly around Riddle-Hart as a dinner tray spun viciously at Sirius and the sickly green of a killing curse flew at Dumbledore.

A steel bedpan leaped into the air in front of the Headmaster, intercepting the deadly spell before shattering in a fire-works like pyrotechnic display.

Sirius caught the spinning tray with a spell and redirected it towards the curtain wrapped Riddle-Hart before firing several potent stunners towards Dumbledore.

The binding curtain dissolved in gouts of writhing flame, leaving an unhurt Riddle-Hart to fend off the high-speed tray at the last second.

Harry saw Dumbledore attempting to prevent spells from slipping passed, towards Harry or the others. Much if his efforts went into animating furniture to attack or defend, rather than directly trying to hit either of the other two men.

Riddle-Hart noticed Dumbledore's actions too, and occasionally fired spells at Harry or the others, just to force the struggling Headmaster to exert himself harder. Every other spell the Minister cast was the killing curse, making his attacks the most deadly, but many of them were used up destroying the Headmaster's creations before they could attack.

Sirius continuously attacked both Riddle-Hart and the Headmaster, barely taking the time to defend himself, but opting to move out of the way rather than rely on a shield. He was firing almost non-stop, spraying near-lethal spells at anything and everything.

Harry shook his head to clear it of the lingering effects from the explosion, and urgently started searching for his wand so he could rejoin the battle.

Instead of finding his recently reclaimed wand, he found Riddle's diary.

It was lying on the ground near Malfoy, as if it had fallen out of the man's robes. Lucius was struggling weakly and ineffectually to free himself from the ropes Remus had conjured. His eyes were glazed, and Harry realised he was still not properly conscious.

Harry crawled over and grabbed the Diary, unsure what to do with it, but determined not to let it leave him again. He felt helpless, but without a wand he would only be getting in the way.

A blue spell from Riddle-Hart slammed into Sirius, lifting him off the ground with the power of its collision.

Harry cried out as his godfather crashed to the ground, and got up to run to him, knowing there was nothing he could do.

"Harry!" called Hermione in warning.

The distraction caused Harry to misjudge his footing. He tripped and fell over Madam Pomfrey's body, landing heavily on the floor, but desperately holding on to the diary.

"Just you and me now, old man," panted Riddle-Hart.

The Minister was bleeding from several deep cuts, and was breathing heavily, almost wheezing with effort, but Dumbledore looked far worse.

The Headmaster leaned against a wall, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Whatever had happened before entering the hospital obviously drained him badly, and the fight was taking its toll. Harry knew Dumbledore couldn't continue for much longer.

Dumbledore looked past Riddle-Hart, directly at Harry.

Harry didn't know how, but the headmaster caught his eye, and then flicked his gaze at something near where Harry was lying, instructing him with a single glance.

The basilisk fang lay on the ground, a mere two feet in front of Harry's hand.

At that moment, Harry knew what he had to do, what he should have done all those months ago in the Chamber when Fawkes had dropped the book into his hands.

Not wasting time getting up, Harry scrambled over to grab the fang, and immediately plunged it into the cover of the Diary. Black ink spurted from the book, like blood from a mortal wound.

Riddle-Hart screamed, and so did the book.

Horried, Harry pulled the fang out. Ink continued to pour from it, covering his hands in thick ichor.

Riddle-Hart blasted Dumbledore aside with an unexpected burst of raw magic, and turned his wand on Harry. Before he could bring it down, a huge black dog came out of nowhere and ploughed into him.

Hesitating only for a second, Harry plunged the fang in again, driving it right through and out the other side.

A dreadful screeching filled the room as Riddle-Hart's body exploded into a blaze of ethereal light.

Padfoot leaped off, and backed away, growling as he limped backwards.

The body convulsed horribly, arching its spine until Harry was sure it would snap. All the while, the white light shone from every part of it, and a voice like a banshee rang out through the castle.

Then it stopped.

The light faded and the body fell lifelessly to the floor. The sound evaporated completely.

A cry from Ron brought Harry out of his stupor.

On the bed where Ron and Hermione had taken cover, Ginny moved her arm weakly.

Epilogue

Hey Kiddo. Harry. Little Prongs.

You use to play on my knee as a baby, remember? I was there for your first steps. Your dad was my best friend in the whole world. Your mum used to cook my favourite dish every Wednesday because she knew I'd always be there.

Listen to me kid. I didn't turn on him. It wasn't me.

Look it doesn't matter if you believe me or not, just listen. When the Dementors come back, in about an hour, hold onto the thought that you are innocent. Keep that one thought and all that it means in your head.

Don't listen to the memories, the Dementors will drag out your worst ones and feed on your good ones. Keep reminding yourself you are innocent, over and over again. It's not a happy memory so they can't feed on it, and it'll stop you going crazy.

What? Of course you are innocent. I don't need a crystal ball to know my godson would be a good man, no matter what happened to him. We all make mistakes, but you can't let them get to you in here, not unless you want to end up like those loonies out there that can't stop screaming.

Look, what have you go to lose? Just try it. Repeat it in your head over and over. Force yourself to remember why you are innocent. Use it to keep you mind together.

What? No, it won't make it any better, but it will keep you from losing it completely.

Me? Been here a bit too long to be totally sane, but I know one thing for sure - I am innocent, and those blasted creatures can't take that away from me.

Trust me, Harry.

The falcon dropped steadily from the clear blue sky towards the young couple sitting at the edge of the lake. They watched it gracefully glide towards them, flaring its wings to almost hover before there was a soft pop, and Harry Potter stood in front of his friends.

A small stand of trees hid them from direct view of the castle, and all of the students were in classes. The Aurors and other Ministry people investigating the death of the Minister were thankfully long gone, so there was little danger of discovery.

A recent newspaper lay discarded on the ground at Harry's feet.

Minister for Magic Possessed

Lucius Malfoy Arrested

The headlines were the most accurate part of the article; the rest made up from rumours and conjecture based on the scant reports leaking from the chaos enshrined Ministry of Magic.

Personal experience meant Harry knew enough about the corruption and biased riddled paper to know there was no point trying to get the real truth printed, but he still felt disgusted at some of the ridiculous notions they were pushing as truth.

One day he wanted to see the perpetrators of the scandal rag punished for their lies; them and the gullible public that worshipped it.

"So what's the verdict?" asked Ron. He was leaning against a tree with one of his arms casually draped over Hermione's shoulders. "You staying or going?"

"It would be safest for you to remain here, Harry," said the ancient Headmaster.

Harry looked out of the window of the old man's office and laughed bitterly.

"Safe? Like first year when Quirell nearly killed me twice? Or safe like second year? And what about Sirius? Would you stop the Auror's

taking him away for questioning? What about if the courts decided he was guilty of something?"

The hesitation in the old man's answer told Harry everything he needed to know.

"Very well then," said the Headmaster with resignation. "I will do my utmost to help prepare an alternate residence for you."

"Going," Harry answered sadly. "Dumbledore tried to talk me out of it, but I am going where Sirius goes, and until he is declared a free man, Hogwarts is too dangerous for him, now that a few people know he was here."

"Surely they believe Professor Dumbledore?" asked Hermione. "And you gave them Pettigrew as proof."

"Sirius, where is Peter?" asked Harry

He was leaning heavily on the only table to survive the destruction of the hospital, while Remus and Madam Pomfrey tended the exhausted and injured Headmaster. The nurse was tutting and mumbling so much that Harry suspected Dumbledore was not going to be allowed out of bed for a month, if she had her way.

The headmaster had sent away the other teachers, who finally arrived to investigate the commotion in the hospital wing, with vague promises of lengthy explanations later.

Sirius had not changed back yet, preferring to stay in dog form.

Padfoot trotted away into the depths of the ruined room, returning moments later with the bloodied, broken, and obviously lifeless body of Wormtail clutched gently in his massive jaws.

He laid the corpse of the betrayer at Harry's feet almost tenderly.

The simple action nearly broke Harry's heart, and he couldn't bring himself to ask if there had been any other choice.

Harry shook his head.

“Dumbledore managed to force the body back into human shape, but without Pettigrew’s confession, it’s not that easy,” he explained, leaving out the fact neither of them trusted Dumbledore very much.

“What about Malfoy?” asked Ron. “I know he was Obliviated, but I still don’t understand why.”

“It’s obvious, Ronald,” said Hermione. “The fewer people who know about Padfoot and Tweety, the better. While they still need to hide, the secret could be vital to their safety.”

“He is still facing charges about Riddle’s Diary and few other things he did during my trial,” assured Harry. “The memories we took don’t make any difference to that. He thinks he was unconscious the whole time after Tweety broke his arm.”

“Tweety,” laughed Ron. “How could you let them pick a name like that for you?”

“Ron!” admonished Hermione smiling playfully. “It’s very impressive that he became an Animagus at all. You can’t expect him to come up with a clever nick-name too...”

Harry smiled.

“You see, Harry,” explained Dumbledore, the twinkle in his eye reaching new heights of amusement. “If I were to be asked to guess your Animagus form, I may well have picked a Falcon, due to your love of flying, but rather than a Peregrine, I would have expected you to have been a Merlin.”

“Merlin”, thought Harry. “Now that would have been a great Marauder name.”

“It’s only temporary,” he explained. “Until I can come up with something better.”

“I wouldn’t be waiting around for inspiration, if I was you,” said Ron. “A name as bad as that is likely to have a nasty habit of overstaying its welcome.”

“So what will happen with your re-trial?” asked Hermione. “Does Professor Dumbledore still believe you will be cleared, even if you don’t appear at it?”

“I am well aware that Professor Snape has indeed opened that Chamber and removed the Basilisk, but that is no longer your best defence,” explained Dumbledore, to both Harry and Sirius. “Miss Weasley, when she recovers sufficiently, will be able to collaborate your version of events leading up to her kidnapping. Without Gilderoy-“

“Or Malfoy,” injected Sirius.

“-there is little doubt you will be declared innocent.”

‘Little’ doubt was still way too much for Harry to risk being sent back to Azkaban. There was no way he was willingly going back into Ministry custody, not for one second.

Harry nodded in answer to Hermione’s question, choosing not to answer in case he slipped and said too much. Faith in the wizarding world was not something Harry stocked in great quantities at the moment.

“How’s Ginny?” he asked Ron instead.

“The diary was more than mere a memory of Tom Riddle,” explained Dumbledore. “It was a vile object of the very darkest nature. My absence and injuries were a direct result of my quest to obtain more information about it, and how to best undo the evil it perpetrated on Ms. Weasley. I can assure you however, that the radical solution you provided was more than adequate, and Ms. Weasley should be in, and of, no further danger.”

“As good as can be expected,” answered Ron enthusiastically. “She has the same healers that treated me, and they say she’ll be up and about again soon, although it’ll be a while before she gets over spending almost a year trapped alone inside a book. Good thing Dumbledore worked it out and did something to keep her busy, although she says he put some pretty weird stuff in there. She’s miles

ahead when it comes to schoolwork. The rest is just going to take time for her to work through it.”

Harry nodded; glad that his efforts to save her, the very act that started this whole nightmare, had not gone to waste.

“Harry,” said Ron. “My folks, they want to say sorry-”

“I know, Ron,” said Harry. “But it’s still too soon. You should tell the twins about what happened with them and me though – they deserve that. The rest is going to have to wait until I’ve had a bit more time, okay?”

“Speaking of time,” said Hermione, reaching inside of her top to draw out a small, golden hour glass hanging from a delicate necklace.

She lifted the chain over her head and handed it to Harry carefully. Ron looked surprised, but didn’t object.

“That’s a Time-Turner,” she explained. “It will let you go back in time a few hours, but you have to be really careful how you use it. Professor Lupin will be able to explain it properly to you.”

Harry knew his mouth was hanging open.

“You know, I for one am not going to miss that thing,” said Ron. “Seems like I’ve been studying forever, this year, but aren’t you going to get in trouble with McGonagall, Hermione?”

“I told her it was broken during the fight in the hospital,” she answered, looking quite embarrassed.

Ron laughed and gave her a hug. “That’s my girl,” he said.

Harry’s brain finally caught up.

“This is why you seemed to be running all over the place, isn’t it? You kept using this to go to extra lessons and things, right? No wonder Tweety got confused all the time when it came to you two.”

“Only way I was ever going to make it through the year with a pass mark,” said Ron. “It did come right in handy for setting up a few pranks too. Best alibi maker in the world that thing is. ‘Oh no, Professor Snape, I was in the Great Hall all lunch – you can ask anybody!’”

All three laughed a bit before falling into an uncomfortable silence. The lapping of small waves caused by the giant squid as it lounged about on the surface of the lake, and the happy chirping of birds in the near-by forest, made for a peaceful and soothing background.

“So, when do you leave?” asked Hermione.

“Tomorrow morning,” answered Harry. “Padfoot and Moony have gone to prepare one of their places, and Dumbledore is going to take me there and then put the final wards in place. He says he needs to talk with them some more too, but I’m not quite sure what he is planing. They reckon this house is the safest place we can stay until we are all healed up or declared innocent, but neither of them seems very happy. I get the feeling it’s not very pleasant there.”

“Doesn’t leave us much time,” said Ron sadly. “I don’t suppose we are going to be allowed to come visit you much, once school is out?”

Harry laughed and held up the hourglass.

“I reckon we’ll have all the time in the world, Ron.”

“All the time in the world.”

In a grimy and dank cell in the lowest level of the most feared prison of the Wizarding world, a lone voice cried out in triumph, shattering the silence.

After months of work, she had succeeded. Endless hours of trying desperately to recall snatches of overheard conversations finally paid off.

The voice wasn’t human, but it still belonged to Bellatrix Lestrange.

Finite Incantatem.

Final Author's Note.

Yes this is the end of the tale.

The plot outline always had it finishing at this point, so it is not “cut short” or anything like that. This was the complete story with the ending exactly where I planned it all along.

Sorry if you were expecting hundreds of chapters and a story going through to seventh year, but I did say this was a third year AU story. Read my story “The Memory Chest” if you want a longer, fairly canon, seventh year story written before DH was released.

I have a few ideas for an AU fourth year sequel to Fugitives, but it might not happen, since I find myself lacking enthusiasm (and time) for it.

Thanks to all the people who left encouraging comments, especially those of you who messaged me mistakes, and to the people at AFC.

Please leave feedback to let me know what you think about my story.

Ciao

BajaB